

*Flutter
Into
Life*

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Flutter Into Life

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Foreword

Do you want to see a beautiful thing?

Do you want to feel that you are certainly living?

There can be no more beautiful death, except yours.

Only those who shed tears on the night of revolution,
and those who know the taste of blood are the ones to shout.

They cry, “Wait until I let my hands grasp your head in the future.”

Destroy fabrications, cultivate the land,
and plant phantom seeds.

Nothing will be born from there.

Indeed, nothing at all.

All of them are illusions.

At least, only those who fight
will be able to touch the illusions made by humans.

All the things except them are idols,
which are fabricated with rotten mud
by the creatures called adults.

Are you the mud?

If you want to know the answer, you have to fight.

If you want to know who you are,
you have to fight until you die.

Before you end up cracking and rotting away.

Flutter Into Life

Perhaps this is the most important thing for me to take back from beach-living: simply the memory that each cycle of the tide is valid; each cycle of the wave is valid; each cycle of a relationship is valid. And my shells? I can sweep them all into my pocket. They are only there to remind me that the sea recedes and returns eternally.

This excerpt is from *Gift from the Sea* by Anne Morrow Lindbergh

Prologue

Fuko said she loved smoking in a dim room. *To generate the red light is beautiful*, she said. Perhaps, her voice that was husky like a worn brush was due to her inhaling the rusty dimness of that room. I didn't dislike her voice.

A desk lamp with a shade was standing quietly on a cabinet, but I had never seen it with its light on. I guessed that its cord might have been pulled out. *If the light bulb was heated, then it would burn the dust while giving off the scorching smells*. I always heard low buzzing guitar sound from the song. At slow tempo. It continued on and on. Endlessly like breathing.

While lying on Fuko's bed, I was interested in the speed of my own breathing. When I was looking up at the dim ceiling as if I was conducting an astronomical observation, sometimes I could see clouds there. It might have been the smoke exhaled by her. Nothing would be more wonderful than the windshield polycarbonate without a scratch. When I touched it, I felt a bit of pain due to my fingertip being chilled. Even so, for some reason, I had the urge to press my skin against the cold canopy firmly. *May I call it a completely unavoidable temptation? Come to think of it, I think all transparent things are always vibrating slightly*. I wondered what was being rubbed to generate Fuko's voice. *As humans are being rubbed with each other, the mutual political relationships would become smoother. You know, I mean lubrication. Right, that's exactly what I want to speak of. As much as it sounds ridiculous though, that's what I mean*.

Describing a beautiful curve in the clouds.

Silently. Relaxed.

The wings sliced the vapor. Silently, though.

Frozen dust twining around them were twinkling and glittering.

As if they instantly melted, evaporated, and vanished.

So, they were like many lives. *In the very end. Only for the moment*.

They looked like the lives scattering after emitting light.

I saw them. Over and over again. *Look, they are falling. Although they should be still alive, they will die when colliding with the ground*. Those who were looking down at them

were just us. What was waiting for them below was an ocean, or a sea of trees. Or, a desert would also do just fine. The places where people lived were like dots, literally. We could tell just by looking downward at them from the sky. *It is a miracle to be able to get back there properly. I guess such a maneuver would be more difficult than to be born at those particular places smoothly.*

I am sure that the final short flight to go down to the ground is as splendid as an ordinary life. Which aspect of the splendor, you may ask. I mean, having already known the moment of death.

I brought my eyes back to the horizontal level again. Then, a carefree cloud like a loaf of bread was still floating there. Its gray flat bottom looked as if it was baked with a frying pan. *Even though the air higher up is thinner, for some reason the color of the sky gets deeper as the altitude increases.*

Fuko pulled the sheet, which brought me back to the ground instantly. *Ah, I forget I'm now on the ground. I have been brought down.* The bed was soft, but it was not because I was floating. *Feminine bodies are generally soft, probably because they have been floating, I guessed. You know, everyone was originally floating in a woman's body. Come to think of it, that's true. We have gone down to this place. Otherwise, are we now in the middle of falling?*

“Oh, are you awake?” Fuko looked at me.

She brought her face close to me. She had applied on her hair jam-like perfume. It assailed my nostrils. The other day, I had an urge to tidy up my room and borrowed a vacuum-cleaner from the office. I scraped the floor with it, but was really irritated because its cord got entangled this and that, here and there. When I noticed that the vacuum cleaner stopped working, I found the cord being unplugged because I had forcefully pulled it by accident. Once it got caught under a leg of the bed, and I could not move it at all even though I tried to pull it out. *The reason why I am recalling the memory is that I think women in general are the beings that are like the vacuum cleaner power cord. In short, it is always entangled with something everywhere, and it wouldn't move at all no matter how hard I pull it. It really irritates me. But everything stops immediately, as soon as it is disconnected.*

“Hey, when is the next time?” She asked.

“About what?”

“I mean, when will you come here next?”

“How can I say anything about that? You know, I don’t know when I will be able to fly next time. Also, I have no idea of when I will encounter enemy aircrafts.”

“So, do you also not know when you will shoot the enemy down next time?”

“If I encounter it, I think I can.”

“You are confident, aren’t you?”

“Once it is proven that I am not confident, then it means that I am already dead. I will not be able to come here if I die, so I will lose nothing by making the statement.”

“Of course, I know you are also a quibbler.”

She extended her arm and touched my hair. Each time I met her, she was always in a bad mood. *Ah, we can find a garden-variety mother like her everywhere*, I thought so at first. But as we shared the time, she was getting gradually gentler. If she was gentle to this extent, I could manage to regard her as a sister-like being. She was at her gentlest, every time we parted from each other. *It must be the case, probably because of her business*, I thought. She might have behaved bluntly in the beginning in order to make the last moment outstanding with her relative kindness. If she was doing it on purpose, based on the calculation, then that sure was impressive. But, I guessed she was the one to execute such a reckoning. She was not an idiot, certainly.

“You have drunk alcohol, haven’t you?” I spoke.

“Huh? Me? Umm, I did so much earlier today. I think I had a bit of that around noon.”

“You’re lying. I am sensing the smell of alcohol.”

“Don’t you think that the smell of alcohol is good?”

“I don’t think so. I prefer the smell of gasoline.”

“So, what? You want me to drink gasoline?” Fuko pouted with her eyes smiling. “If so, it would be extremely dangerous when I smoke.”

“It would not be a problem, if you quit smoking.” I said. “My guess is that you smoke something other than cigarette.”

“Why do you think so? No way.”

“It’s not the smell of cigarette.”

“It’s perfume.”

I stood up from the bed and put on a shirt. When my soles touched the floor, I recalled the fact that I was a human.

“Hey, when is the next time?” I heard Fuko’s voice behind me.

I said nothing. It was the second time that she asked me the question. To repeat the same reply was ridiculous. *If I repeat the same turn repeatedly, I will be cornered and shot down immediately.*

Lastly, I put on a hat. Fuko was sitting on the bed naked.

“Then, see you later.”

“Come back here again, please.” Fuko’s voice sounded like a fuzzy blanket.

I got out of the room and climbed down the stairs. A propeller was reluctantly rotating above the stairwell. The lobby was also smoky, but at least it was bright here. A woman with up-angled slanted eyes was standing by a window and holding a long cigarette in her hand. She cast a searching glance at me, but said nothing. Her nails looked like beaks of paddy birds.

I went through the entrance door without stopping and was walking to my vehicle in the cold air. Maybe because of the chill, the asphalt was miserably cracked. Before I opened the door of the vehicle, I kicked a tire gently with my toe. I intended to check the air pressure. Only this side, though.

The starter roared and the engine began to work. While I made the engine idle to warm it up and prepare to move smoothly, Fuko ran out of the building. She was wearing a coat, and just a pair of slippers on her bare feet. I lowered the side window. *The only convenient part of an automobile are the windows, without doubt.*

“Jinro, well, please ...” Fuko inserted both her white hands into the window. Her lukewarm hands touched my cheeks. “Come see me again. Promise. I love you.”

“I will, if I can.” I said without smiling. I thought I was rude to her, if I smiled.

“You must not die, okay?”

“I wonder if I must not, though.”

“Oh, sorry. Are you angry? Next time, can you come a little earlier? Let’s go out together. I mean, we will go somewhere to eat something.”

“Why?”

“You ask me why ... You know, that has got to be fun.”

“Really ... Understood.” I nodded. “May I leave now?”

Fuko stretched the skin of my face gently. She put her own head inside the window and let our lips make contact with each other forcefully. Her lips were colder than her hands. *It may mean that she is honest by that much.*

She released her hold of my face. I brought the window back to its original position. The engine sounded as if it wanted to get warmer. But I put the car in gear and backed my car. Looking sideways at Fuko, who was waving, I cut the steering wheel.

I got out of the parking lot and drove to a path running through a forest. Of course, the engine was grumbling. I knew that because it was still cold. *Only living creatures and engines want to get warmer. This rule would be applied anywhere.*

I wonder why I have to drive along a road. I wonder why I have to drive while rubbing the ground. I wonder why I do not have to lean toward right or left. These questions of wonder, which were accumulated like fallen leaves, covered the stuff called ground. *The clearer things are lighter and end up going up higher. The sky is the clear layer at the top of this world.* For example, in Fuko’s room, both the bed and we humans were sunken at the bottom. The socks, which Fuko took off, were on the floor. Only the smoke rose upward.

Yes, the smoke.

And, the cloud.

Although it is actually floating, it looks as if it doesn’t move. No matter how hard I gaze into it, it doesn’t seem to move soon. Despite that, its form changes while I take my eyes off it for a moment.

Even when I am driving on a road, I sometimes find myself looking up at the sky. Since the roof of the automobile obstructs my view, I often bend forward subconsciously. I mean, it is a type of vehicle that tires me by that much.

It was a straight road. I recognized a large-sized motorcycle was coming toward me from the front side. Its headlight was on. When it came closer, I let my foot release the accelerator.

It was Tokino. I could recognize him thanks to the shape of his goggles. After having the headlights flashing, I put on the brakes. The motorbike stopped suddenly as well. I thought we could do such actions, because of our good eyesight. He was one of my colleagues at the current airbase and we shared a room of the billet. He was a bit too big as a pilot. *I guess that he feels cramped in the cockpit.*

After he passed my car a little, he raced the engine and made a U-turn.

I lowered the window, which I had opened for Fuko earlier, faster for Tokino than for her.

“How’s it going?” Tokino greeted, after coming to the side of my car and putting his goggles upward.

“About what?” I asked back loudly, for the engine sound of his motorbike was noisy.

“Umm, nothing in particular.” He groped with his glove for something around his cuff. He seemed to be looking at his wristwatch. “Why are you returning to the base so fast ...? Oh, do you want to drop by somewhere?”

“No.” I lied.

“Sorry about asking you the question. But it was you who stopped me.”

“I merely greeted you.”

“Greeted me? Why? We live in the same room every day.”

“Right.” I smiled wryly and nodded. “I forgot about it.”

“You never say ‘Good morning,’ to me.”

“Oh, don’t I?”

Tokino laughed while showing his white teeth and put his finger onto the side part of his head. *I guess he wants to say, “You’re crazy.”*

“Later.” He raised his black glove. “You met Fuko?”

I nodded without words.

“She is hard for me to deal with.” He confessed, had his lips curved, and twisted his wrist. He made the engine roar twice, and moved forward. Then, he made the turn again while having the spinning back wheel slide and accelerated toward the direction behind me.

I started my car, too. I saw no other automobiles in front of and behind mine. I momentarily thought we had passed each other at an appropriate place. I wondered why such a thing came up to my mind. *I need not hide what I did. No one wants to know such information.*

When I drove for about two kilometers, I turned to the left at the intersection. If I wanted to go back to the base, I had to go straight. In short, it was a side-tracking that I was making.

Through the trees standing upright, I could see rows of rectangular roofs. Brown fallen leaves completely covered the ground except the road. I went down straight and reached a short, diagonally downward slope on the left side of a white fence. I saw a short building for feeding birds and a grassland spreading beyond it. I was driving on an unpaved road along with short fences of piled up stones. Several trees with abundant leaves were lined up on the right and a small house was hidden below them. The paint, which was coming off, might have been originally light blue. I guessed the window frames were cream-painted. I parked my car before it, and was walking over the remaining tens of meters as usual. I could have gotten the car closer to the house, but I did not want her to be surprised by the engine sound and the exhaust fumes. It was about the only thing I could do for her.

Still, she always noticed it and opened the door before I reached it. *Perhaps, no, probably, I expect that.* So, I was deliberately walking slowly at the final part of moving by foot. *Be calm.* Right, I tell myself, “*Be calm.*”

The door was opened and her smile appeared.

“Oh, hi, Mr. Kurita. Welcome.” She was climbing down the wooden steps while making noise. She always wore brown boots. Those were the ones with white shoelaces interlaced on them.

“Hello.” I stopped and bowed. Recently, probably thanks to her, I have not have a weird feeling even when bowing. “I happen to come near here.”

“It’s cold outside. Please, come on in.”

“Thank you so much.”

We always exchanged the same speech. Exactly the same. *But I recently came to know that some unchanged things are good. If winter comes, leaves will fall as usual. As for the sun, it always does the same thing.*

I sat down on a chair by a table with round corners. A tablecloth made with patchworks. Lace curtains, which looked soft, were hung by the windows. Flowers in vases. Framed pictures were decorated on a wall. The smiles in them. I was viewing them in the same order as usual.

She was making tea in the kitchen. I occasionally heard faint sounds. I was listening to them. It was very tranquil here. Even if the sky should be tranquil in the beginning, I had never confirmed the silence because there always were engine sounds of airplanes and noises of the wings whizzing in the wind.

Nothing seemed to have changed in her room. Several stuffs were placed in slightly different positions near a stove. A checked lap robe in red and green was on a chair near a window. She must have been sitting there. A book was put on a side table. *I wonder what book that is.* Its cover happened to be oriented correctly, and was reflecting the sunlight from outside to the level that I could not read the title. I was about to stand up to check it out, but decided to stop it. *Why do I have the right to step into the domain? Just by sitting here and waiting for her tea, I have already trespassed into her territory too much.*

I strengthened my determination as if I was turning on a switch, and looked at the wall again. I focused on a picture on it. It was a smiling face of a young man. For some reason, I always end up looking at it. He appeared to a bit younger than the one that I knew. He flew with me only once and was unfortunately shot down then. I sometimes fail to recall his name. Occasionally, I fail to describe his face in my mind. *Still, I remember the color of the smoke spouting from his aircraft.*

I drank the tea that she prepared.

While stealing a glance at her smile.

In front of her, I had never seen the wall. I intended not to look at the direction. I had my eyes face the window. When I was talking with her, I suppressed the urge and pretended to be interested in the scenery outside. I reduced my desire for viewing her down to about one-tenth of its original intensity. Like I was saving the

bullets of my ammunition, I looked into her pupils. Still, I refrained myself from paying attention to her other parts. Her hair, lips, neck, shoulders, pale hands, and white fingers.

“Have you recently experienced anything unusual?” She asked.

“Me? No, not at all.”

“Is Mr. Tokino doing okay?”

“Yes.”

“The other day, Ms. Kusanagi came here.”

“Oh, did she?” The information surprised me.

Suito Kusanagi was my superior. Also, she was the flight commander at the airbase I belonged to at the time. *Why did she visit here?* I thought. *Perhaps, she knows that I come here. I might be violating the regulation.* I started thinking about such a thing.

“Why does Captain Kusanagi come here?” I asked.

“Well ..., I wonder why.” She chuckled. After putting her tea cup back onto the table, she fixedly gazed at me. “But, I also wonder why you come here so kindly ...” She shook her head, while smiling. Before I knew it, her smile changed to the face that was about to burst into tears or showed the suppressed crying, even though her eyes and mouth were not moving at all.

“Umm ...” I was looking for the proper words to say.

“No, it was not what I meant.” She said first. “I am, well, very happy that you come here.” She kept looking downward. “Honestly, that’s true.”

That’s good, I felt honestly. I suspected that she might have not welcomed me. No, I even thought she had regarded my visit as an annoyance ... But, words always appeared with the beautiful decoration like this. It was not that they indicated the true, secret minds. On the other hand, even if the words were decorated, even if they were downright lies, I occasionally felt happy because of the fact that they were decorated, and that I was protected with lies. For example, they were the same as wedding dresses brides wore.

The tea had already become cold. When I finished it up, I stood up and announced, “So, I’m leaving now.”

She showed a face that looked a little sad. This was the same, old, as usual, again. I was waiting for a few seconds for her to speak. But, nothing came out as always.

I got out from the entrance door and climbed down the steps, when I looked back and bowed to her. *Won, what an honest bow*, I thought.

“Please come back again, at any time.” She said.

As usual. I wonder how many times I have experienced this.

Looking downward, I was walking on the ground to my car. I pulled a cold metal door to open it, and looked at her again. As I expected, she was waving. Everything was as always. Both of us repeated this routine like a cycle of seasons.

When I started coming here, I sometimes bought flowers for her. But after she said she did not want me to do that, I stopped doing so obediently. *I have never made a phone call to her. I have never written a letter to her, of course. I wonder if our relationship would continue like this forever.*

I don't think so. After all, she ages.

And, as for me, I would be shot down someday in the future.

So.

Our relationship like this could not possibly continue forever.

I understand that. I believe both of us understand the rule. So, should we enjoy the present time that we can repeat? It is a remark that God might exclaim. I think that's not quite right.

I get the impression that various things are wrong.

I think I myself am wrong.

Until I got back to the base, I was thinking about another thing. I was making a prediction about when I would make a sortie next time. I was worrying about a new pitch control system. A new type of propeller governor, and its accompanying parts. Spark plugs and oil that were replaced when winter started.

It is cold on the ground, I thought. But I know it is far more frigid in the sky. Mysteriously, I don't feel the chill in the sky. I might become unable to feel it. I might have come to lose the ability to feel the temperature.

In the sky, I do not think about human beings, my own life, or the society. To put it more

correctly, I cannot think about them. I wonder if such a thing is the effect of the sky.

As I got closer to the airbase, I became gradually indifferent to worldly things. *I am sure that it is my reaction because the place is the entrance to the sky for me.*

I stopped my car at a parking lot on the premises. While walking toward the billet, I saw Suito Kusanagi standing in front of the office building. She was folding her arms and glaring at me with a displeased look. I slightly made a salute and was about to pass by her.

“Have you met Tokino?” Kusanagi asked.

“Oh, yes, ma’am. We passed by each other on the way.” I replied.

“You did.” With her chin raised, she was looking straight at me, “Have you dropped by somewhere?”

“Are you talking about me, on my way back?”

Uncharacteristically, I thought a bit about what she meant. *Kusanagi knows at what time Tokino left the base. She also knows where I and Tokino go to. If we passed by each other, the numbers don’t add up. Which means, she may be coming down to the conclusion of her suspicion that I dropped by somewhere after passing Tokino.*

“Yes, ma’am.” I might have smiled. I felt that way. “To the place ... Oh, I heard Ms. Kusanagi has visited there. Have you?”

“I see.” She opened her mouth a bit. “Still, I’m impressed by your audacity to visit the place after having slept with a woman.”

“Come to think of it, you are making a point.” Such a point was what I had not even thought about. I found myself bursting into laughter. “Ma’am, how can you think of such a thing in the way?”

“Failing to think that way is a sign of mental anomaly.”

“Really ... Well, that’s that, though. But Ms. Kusanagi, why have you visited her?”

“What do you mean by the question?”

“Ma’am?”

“So, Kurita, why do you visit her?”

“Umm ...”

“Do you think that it is natural for man, but weird for woman?”

“Ah, I wonder ... No, that’s not true.”

“Will you visit her, if she is a grandma of a fallen one?”

“Umm, I have no idea. I have never imagined that ...”

“Here, that is the reason after all.”

“No, I have held the answer, ma’am.” I shook my head. “I’m not sure.”

“Sorry about asking you a silly question.” Kusanagi apologized, while looking at a distant place. It was the tendency that she showed when she was talking. “Think of it as my joke, please.”

If I can think that way, I would surely be happy, I thought.

“Ah, but, I myself don’t have that wish.” She sighed.

“What wish?”

“Well, you know ... That’s okay. But, if I am shot down and die, I want no one to come to my house or thing like that.”

“I won’t. I promise, ma’am.”

“Thank you.” Kusanagi relaxed her lips a bit.

I climbed up the stairs in the billet and entered an unlocked room. It was a room as if it had been stored in a fridge. A bunk bed was placed inside and the lower deck was mine. Tokino used the upper part. I thought I would take a nap for a short while. It might have been my desire to want to wrap myself in a blanket. I loved the process of a cold blanket becoming warmer gradually.

It has been a leisurely, good day.

However, if possible, I want to fly tomorrow.

Episode 1: Outside Loop But woman refinds in a limited form with each new child, something resembling, at least in its absorption, the early pure relationship. In the sheltered simplicity of the first

days after a baby is born, one sees again the magical closed circle, the miraculous sense of two people existing only for each other, the tranquil sky reflected on the face of the mother nursing her child.

This excerpt is from *Gift from the Sea* by Anne Morrow Lindbergh

-1-

Since I started partnering with Tokino, things had been going well for me. Maybe because we were compatible with each other. However, the ways of our flying were completely different. Tokino was bold and about trying to fly straight. I hardly let the control surfaces stay neutral. After all, it might be just the difference between polygons and curves. Even so, the depletion of aircrafts would be entirely different. Each of us was more confident about being more reasonable than the other, and we had never had a discussion about the issue. Still, if I said, “You fly discretely as always,” he talked back to me, “Why do you always fly so crookedly?” About the vertical movements, he liked to get the position below the enemy. I usually preferred the position above the target. *Is the difference caused by whether you like the inverted flight or not?* I talked about the subject just once with Tokino. He lastly commented, “Hey, I take it that you prefer the Fosbury Flop for the style of high jump. Correct?” Unfortunately, I had never participated in the athletic event of high jump, so I could say nothing back to laughing Tokino.

Honestly, I had never thought I liked the inverted flight. You know, I did not think I dared to become upside down. *When flying in the sky, I sometimes forget which is above and which is below. Both the ground and the outer space are equally distant.* I intermittently felt, “Ah, I might be getting pulled to this direction.” More than that, I felt as if the air around me wanted to be ascending. If I did not have an altimeter, I would not have been able to notice the presence of the ground until it appeared right in front of me.

When Tokino mentioned it, I recognized the way of my flying for the first time. Conversely speaking, the person named Tokino was interesting in the way. I learned

a lot from him. The person whom I first realized that I could learn from was Suito Kusanagi. But now, I felt Tokino's very being was closer to me than she was. *I mean, I can easily reach out for him, therefore, I can make use of him. Suito Kusanagi's presence is too far.*

When I and Tokino flew alone together, we once encountered a single enemy bomber plane in a solo flight. It was not accompanied with an escort fighter. Probably, it was a survivor among many aircrafts which were flying at one point. Although we were in the middle of a scouting mission, to attack the target was an appropriate decision to make. I approached Tokino and waited for his signal. After noticing his sending the green light, I climbed up and he took the position below the enemy.

It was a six-engined large tailless aircraft. Its figure looked like an overly gigantic boomerang. It was the model we called "Croissant." It was rather formidable, for it has turrets that can rotate very fast at the both edges of its main wings. Even if that was the case, I thought our two fighter aircrafts could shoot it down by working together, especially because I and Tokino were the pilots.

When I first approached the enemy at an angle of 60 degrees behind and above it, I realized that it could shoot fairly accurately. *It would be dangerous for me to get too close,* I recognized. They were shooting in the rear direction from the turrets on its both wings at one target point. *At least, I wish I could halve them. To do so, I and Tokino have to target one of them timely and simultaneously.* While thinking about it, I was contacted by Tokino through the radio. The fact that we needed to make the radio contact with each other meant that we were dealing with an urgent situation.

"Dead Eye, can you hear me?"

"Yeah, let's lunge simultaneously from up and down."

"No, we have to withdraw."

"What?"

"Another one is coming from below. Just go up for now. I will do so as well."

I had instantly turned over my aircraft and made the ascent while looking downward. *Is it coming from behind me?* In a few seconds, it entered my sight. It was a single-engine, small aircraft.

Tokino's aircraft was ascending. I too was climbing up more while keeping mine inverted. *If we have to face only one enemy, the two of us will shoot it down anyway. Although I have just jettisoned my drop tank, the fuel is still enough,* I thought. *But, Tokino is the leader, which means I cannot resort to a selfish act.* We continued to fly at the high altitude.

I had been checking behind me, but nothing was chasing us.

After getting back to the base, I stopped my aircraft before a hangar and rushed toward the office building. At the time, I only raised a hand to the mechanics.

The door of Kusanagi's office was open, and I saw Tokino already taking a seat in a sofa.

"Excuse me, ma'am." After making a salute, I entered the room.

"Oh? You need not come here." Tokino said with his usual face. It was not a blunt tone, but I found myself stopping in a moment.

"No, don't leave. Have a seat." Kusanagi, standing by the window, commanded. She was holding a cigarette in her hand. She looked to be in a relatively good mood.

The remark that Tokino had just made was according to the regulation. When we completed a scouting duty, only the leader had to report the result. However, when we encountered the enemy and fought against it, all the pilots had the responsibility to report it. In short, Tokino had got to be thinking that the latest incident was not considered to be a battle. We did not shoot a bullet. But the enemy aimed the machine gun toward me, and shot it. There was a possibility that Tokino did not see it. Perhaps, it was a dead angle at which he could not see it. Or, he might want to insist nothing happened because of the bothersome work to make a report. As I was thinking about this and that, I had decided to keep silent and not to speak first, and then sat next to him.

"Kurita, did you see an enemy aircraft?" Kusanagi asked.

"Well ..." I studied Tokino's facial expression.

"You know, that fighter aircraft." He gave me a direction in a low voice.

"Ah, yes, I did. But it was flying far below me."

"What type of aircraft do you think it was?"

"Well, I have no idea. I just recognized that it was of a single-engine tractor

configuration.”

“I was closer to it. The distance between me and the aircraft was half of that between it and Kurita.” Tokino said.

“So, I see.” Kusanagi nodded. She was still beside the desk, while keeping her arms crossed.

Suddenly, I felt the urge of talking about that.

“Um, both wings of the Croissant shot toward me.” I might have thought I had to talk more, once I sat down there.

“I have already talked about it.” Tokino said. He made a short sigh. “I wonder where the Croissant headed for after that. Ma’am, is there any report about it?”

“Nothing at all.” Kusanagi shook her head, but she looked to be somewhat smiling.

Finally, I noticed that the atmosphere of her demeanor differed from usual. I did not understand why. The shape of her eyes and eyebrows were the same. Same lips. But she appeared to be blushing a little. The room was well heated, but not too hot. I wondered if she had just finished jogging. I thought so because I often saw her running along the edge of a runway.

“Okay, thank you.” Kusanagi looked like she was smiling a bit. She might have tried to smile. No, she might have put up with smiling. Either way, it was unusual.

Tokino stood up and I followed suit. We made a salute and left the room. After all, the time I spent on sitting on a sofa might have been about 30 seconds.

After climbing down the stairs, Tokino walked toward a dining hall. I followed him. Before we took seats, he went to the kitchen to take his beer. I did not drink alcohol. Instead, I looked for the cleanest aluminum ashtray that I could find. There was no one else in the dining room. It was earlier than the designated dinnertime.

I lit a cigarette and waited for Tokino, who came back with a bottle of beer and a glass in both hands. He sat in front of me.

“I guess you want to ask me why we ran away, right?” Tokino said.

He leaned the bottle and poured the beer into the glass. I looked at it silently. I wanted to ask the question when we were in the sky. After we came back to the

ground, I could say that I forgot about such a question.

“I saw the marking of a cat on his cowling.” He told me so, after sipping the beer.

“What?”

“The thing that was climbing toward us. Although I did not know why, I was ordered not to fight the particular aircraft if I could avoid it.”

“By whom?”

“Ms. Kusanagi.” He had his thumb up, and pointed it toward the second floor. “Who else could have possibly commanded me so?”

“Oh, with a written document?”

“No, orally.”

“Was it a classified command, you say?”

“So, keep it secret.” Tokino whispered. His face was looking serious. “Some other pilots might have received the same order, though.”

In short, has she told it only to team leaders?

“I wonder why. Perhaps, is that pilot an acquaintance with Ms. Kusanagi?”

“Idiot, if that is the case, then there will be an immediate discharge. Do you think that I can talk about it with you in such a place like this?”

“I have no idea. But then, why?”

“Well, you know, if I make a guess, then it would be because it is dangerous, maybe.”

“Ah ...” I opened my mouth and nodded. *I see his point. He is implying that the pilot was unbelievably formidable.* “Was someone shot down by him in the past?”

“Who knows?” Tokino emptied the glass, and exhaled air. Then, he leaned forward and brought his face close to mine. “Hey, do not tell anyone about it.”

While nodding slightly, I listened to him.

“In the end, she wants to do it by herself.”

“Oh? What do you mean?”

“In the near future, Ms. Kusanagi will fly by herself. Just watch.”

At first, I could not understand what he meant. As I was thinking about it, I came to understand Tokino implying that Kusanagi wished to fight against that very opponent by herself. *Well, that is proper reasoning. For example, she might have been defeated by the pilot in the past. Or, her consort plane might have been shot down by the one in question ... However, the emotion like revenge usually cannot be mixed into our job.* The action was as unusual as the cold virus. Especially, I did not quite have the impression that the same Suito Kusanagi, whom I thought was calm, would do such a deed.

“Tokino, why do you know that?” I asked.

He poured the rest of the beer into the glass, raised just his eyes to stare at me, and suddenly grinned while showing his teeth.

“I’m not sure.” He shook his head. “For some reason, everyone likes to talk with me. I guess it is because I don’t want to know their stories and accounts.”

“From whom did you hear that?”

“I cannot tell you that.” His facial expression went back to its usual self. “Never mind.”

There was no way that Kusanagi herself would talk about it. Especially, it was not a topic that she should have talked about with her subordinate. *If so, who in the airbase would know it?* I was thinking about it. *If someone in the base can know of it, the only person that I can come up with in my mind is Sasakura, a mechanic.*

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After the dinner, I went to a hangar. It was not the one mooring my aircraft, but the one where the mechanic Sasakura was working. Only this one was one size larger than others, because a factory-like facility with large machine tools was attached to the back of it. Sasakura owned the place like the master of a dungeon. In fact, he seemed to be living in a pit under the facility. I was impressed by how he could sleep in such an oily place.

Although the hangar was shuttered, I saw the light through a slight opening below the door. I opened the aluminum door and got inside. Two Sankas were moored

before me, and the aircrafts were lit up. Under a fuselage, one mechanic was working. He seemed to be responsible for doing the work around the machine gun.

“Excuse me.” I approached him and asked. “Is Mr. Sasakura here?”

“At the backside.” He waved a hand, which was holding a monkey wrench.

“Is this one Ms. Kusanagi’s?” What I asked was about the aircraft. For the life of me, I could not remember numbers. It was my characteristic.

“Right.”

“What are you examining?” I asked while bending my knees and looking at the part under the wing again.

“I am replacing the machine gun.” The mechanic looked at me and sighed. “With the new one, which we have received.”

“Really. I have not heard of it. A new model?”

“No, just a new one. No more than a replacement part.”

“Malfunctioning?”

“No, the old one had no troubling issue. The new one is lighter by 1.5 kilograms.”

“How can that be achieved?”

“Well, they might have used titanium, or something.”

“Hmm. But if the effect of lightening the load is just by 1.5 kilograms, I see little point.”

“Yeah, it is not enough of improvement. The specifications remain the same, and its weapon catalog data was not changed.”

“Still, did she order you to replace it?”

“Yeah.” The mechanic smiled wryly and nodded. “You know, that is Ms. Kusanagi.”

“Umm, did you not talk her back that she should have been on a diet, just by 1.5 kilograms?”

“How could I dare to say such a thing?”

I stood up and looked up at the ceiling. A crane was right above me, and a hook hung down from it. Each time I looked up at the ceiling of the hangar, I recalled a circus that I had seen just once in my childhood. *But, a swing is not here.* A model aircraft with a propeller driven by the springiness of a rubberband was stuck in a railing of a catwalk. Someone must have had it fly all the way there.

I found Sasakura in a small anteroom before a workshop. A pot was on a cooking stove and he was adjusting the fire.

“Sir, what are you making?” I asked at the door.

“Coffee. I’m afraid that it is just for me.” Sasakura replied while looking back. “How unusual. How may I help you?”

“Do you have time now?” I took one step into the room.

“To do what?” Sasakura asked me while facing his back toward me.

“Umm, not such a big deal, though. Err, yes, you know, about Ms. Kusanagi’s Sanka. Its machine gun is being replaced, correct?”

“Yeah. So?”

“Umm ... I wonder if she will fly tomorrow.”

“I’m not sure.” Sasakura was still facing another direction.

“I flew earlier today with Mr. Tokino, when we encountered an enemy aircraft with a cat’s marking on it. Then, we withdrew from the potential encounter suddenly.”

Sasakura said nothing and looked back toward me. He was staring straight at me for a few seconds.

“That’s all.” I added a few more words. Honestly, I wanted to ask him the reason why Kusanagi was showing such a delighted face. But it was difficult for me to formulate the question to ask him about that. In addition, I thought it was my biased impression. I felt embarrassed to talk about what I was thinking over the situation.

“I see.” Sasakura nodded slightly, turned his back toward me, and resumed the process of making his coffee. “I think she should have retired by now.”

“Sir, sorry?”

“Nothing.”

Retirement? I wondered if he was talking about Kusanagi. Even after she had become the commander of this airbase, she occasionally got on a fighter aircraft. Which meant that she commanded herself to make a sortie. The number of her sorties would be less than half of what she did in the past. *But in her case, I guess the retirement as a pilot would be out of question. In reality, her ability as a pilot could not have declined.*

According to an account I heard, our headquarters office did not seem to want Suito Kusanagi to make a sortie. Even I could imagine the reason for that. They were afraid of exhausting her. Because they recognized the value of Suito Kusanagi as an advertising icon. But it was downright ridiculous from my point of view, and I was sure that Kusanagi herself had never welcomed such a situation, of course.

How her exhaustion, namely her death, would affect the organization, had nothing to do with her. We pilots are never afraid of our deaths. Rather, I can even say we feel the romantic notion about dying. In fact, the pilots' ideologies possess such a basis. So, we have the sense of values that those who do not fly can never understand.

For us pilots, companies, societies, nations, and all other things are no more than boring dramas like the history in the distant past. They hardly move and flow, like viscous clay or mud. I do not feel anything more than being accumulated, rotten, and just returned to nothing. Compared to that, the death by being shot down and falling to the ground are at least brilliantly flashy. We can continue to fly, just because we are aware of that.

Ah, but, thinking about such a thing itself is rotten. It might be the proof that one of my legs is standing on the ground.

Sasakura started drinking his coffee, I left the hangar. I had decided to go back to my room and read some magazines. Tokino was not in our room.

In the early morning of the following day, when it was still dark, we received the

order to make a sortie. Still, we had time to have a breakfast. After it became brighter, three Sankas took off. Kusanagi, Tokino, and I.

Each time Kusanagi flew, I would accompany her as the escort. It was my duty. But, it was not that she would get on a bomber plane. If a dogfight started, no one could guard her fighter aircraft. We could not even catch up on her. It would only be safe to assume that having an escort by her side was still better than nothing. I could not understand what and how those on the ground expected out of issues surrounding her. For example, if Kusanagi was about to be shot, did they want me to be her shield and receive the bullets instead of her? If someone could execute such an inhuman maneuver, the one would have become the ace better than Kusanagi. I surely would want to meet such a pilot.

I had known Suito Kusanagi for quite a long time. I had flown with her for more than one year. The way of Kusanagi's flight was, if I described it with one phrase, a leaf blown away by the wind. She danced lightly as if the wind was flowing only around her. If I observed her flight maneuver, I could be fascinated by the movement. What I had learned from Kusanagi was that we should never stop even for a moment. *Do not calm down. Do not cool off. If you have time to take a break, you should hit the next control surfaces.* I might have learned the lesson to a certain extent. Additionally, to catch the enemy's movements in such an unsettled, untidy situation is even more essential. The expected persistency was at an unbelievably high level.

One of her flying style was called "Kusanagi Circus" among the colleagues. It was the combination of gentle and abrupt turns that make use of stalling, and then recovering the orientation immediately with just the torque control after falling backward by using the reaction of continual firing of shots in addition to the stalling. If someone saw it, it would be mistaken for the aircraft suffering from an accident. I had seen the movement just once. So, I knew the actuality of the maneuver. Kusanagi had never explained the maneuver to others. Although I myself had once tried to do it for myself, it did not work well at all. I must have lacked something. It was dangerous if I could not control the movement, so I did not want to try it in an actual combat. Maybe, I should have collapsed the airframe weight balance in advance. For example, making the rear part heavier than usual or something like that. *I mean, it is only to execute that turn successfully. If Kusanagi retires someday, I will do nothing but ask her about the secret of the technique.*

The sky was being cleared up, free of clouds. We flew above the sea, but the shore was close. The altitude was not so high. Our opponents did not seem to be bombers. We did not see anything like a ship on the ocean. Still, our enemies would take off from a ship. We received the information about the aircraft carrier. So, I thought we had to fly ahead of the carrier's course to check or scout it. When Kusanagi herself flew, even Tokino did not know the objective.

We flew in the same direction for a while, but found nothing. Our course was changed, and we followed Kusanagi's aircraft to head for the land. *Are we going to return straight to the base?* I thought.

Clouds started gathering again a bit. I saw mountains very far away. Tokino's aircraft was flying on the right side behind Kusanagi's and I was to the upper left behind his.

Suddenly, Kusanagi started ascending. I pulled the elevator and pushed up the throttle. It was an unusual, sudden climb. I looked backward repeatedly, but saw nothing in particular. Tokino's aircraft also seemed to be checking downward while rolling slowly.

We were still going up. No radio communication. *The gaining of the altitude may be meaning that the enemy aircrafts were getting close.* I wondered if Kusanagi received the emergency signal. *If we take into the account of the altitude at which we are flying, the potential enemies will likely to come not from above, but from below.*

Finally, Kusanagi brought her aircraft back to the horizontal flight. I had mine horizontal, and at the same time, inverted. I looked up toward the direction of the ground. I saw nothing but thin clouds.

However, a dot-like object or two were emerging from the cloud.

After a moment, there were three. *There had not better be the fourth one,* I prayed.

I took a deep breath slowly, and got prepared for jettisoning the drop tank.

I checked the meters. Fuel, oil pressure, oil temperature, and altitude.

I removed the safety lock of the machine guns. Fastening the belt tightly again by a bit.

I exchanged the air in the goggles.

The number of the enemy was three as well. They were ascending and approaching us rapidly.

It was obvious that they were coming and targeting at us.

“They are twin-engined.” I heard Kusanagi’s voice. We no longer needed to refrain from using the radio anymore. “Their climbing speed is fast. Be careful.”

“Throw your drop tank against them.” Tokino said. That was impossible.

Tokino jettisoned his drop tank. I got my aircraft back to the normal orientation and detached my drop tank. Its reaction force made my aircraft float a little. Kusanagi was flying above me and had the main wings of her aircraft vertical. Then, she had it inverted slowly and descended obliquely. She was still keeping her drop tank. The edges of the wings were slicing the air, and I saw white streams coming out of them. The canopy reflected the sunlight intermittently. It meant that she was frequently changing its angle of orientation to the right and left by that much. After making sure that Tokino’s aircraft was leaning toward the opposite direction, I lowered the nose of my aircraft to follow Kusanagi.

The enemy aircrafts scattered to different directions. Two propellers were rotating at the rear part of each of all the three aircrafts. It was a new model, which I had started seeing since about half a year before that. Its velocity and climbing power were outstanding. But I guessed its turning ability was sacrificed.

While keeping its orientation inverted, Kusanagi’s aircraft was flying horizontally as if she was luring the enemies. One of those coming from below turned its direction toward hers.

I aimed at the one flying straight toward me.

Another one was continuing to ascend behind me. While making sure of its course, I gradually lowered the flaps, choked the throttle, and slowed down while not to be noticed by the enemy.

It passed above in front of me. It was a bit too far for me to shoot down.

I had my aircraft oriented obliquely with the ailerons, and pulled the elevators slightly.

As I ascended to a certain extent, the enemy entered the Immelmann turn phase.

Its intention is to lunge at me. While estimating its range, I pitched the nose of my aircraft upward once, in order to pretend to ascend.

The enemy, which had just entered the diving phase, raised its nose subtly.

I cut off the throttle.

Pull the elevator.

Deflect the ailerons, right and left. Make them work as spoilers.

Putting on the brake and entering the stall.

The opponent noticed it, and pointed its nose downward.

It was normal for it to think I was escaping downward.

But this is where Sanka puts on a show.

I pushed up the throttle.

Right before the aircraft stopped, the engine roared.

I checked the meters for the oil pressure and the altitude.

Put the control surfaces to the neutral positions.

It was lunging at me from my left.

Go.

My Sanka entered the climbing maneuver.

I refrained from making a roll, for it would cause the air resistance.

I could not see half of the sky. I could do nothing but believe the estimation of my prospect.

I expected that the pilot would regard my movement as a feinting gesture.

Certainly, I could do that. It was an overused, classical method, though.

Climbing up. And further up.

The opponent could not pull up its airframe. It could not cancel its velocity.

It did not shoot. It flew and passed by me while flying way too below me.

Slow down the engine.

I cut the ailerons and finally checked the situation around me. I did not see any aircraft near me. Kusanagi and Tokino should be flying far below me.

Stall turn.

The opponent was making a turn as if it was sliding. It looked like it was trying to make a roll with its own brute force.

I saw two small dots far below me. *It has got to be Tokino's. I cannot find Kusanagi's.*

When the nose of my aircraft faced downward, I put the throttle to half its maximum output.

The nose is now pointing straight down.

The opponent was also trying to face me. *Fairly fast.*

All right. Come and get me.

Rolling. At the same time, I put the flaps back to neutral.

High throttle.

I adjusted the direction to the right with the rudders. *Rolling.*

The oil pressure went up slightly.

When the altitude was lowered by 100, I pulled the elevators.

I slid smoothly and horizontally.

Choking the engine. I let the nose point to the left with the rudders.

The right wing tended to go up, but I held it with the aileron control.

While tilting the control stick, my right thumb was stroking the trigger.

I fainted to the left once.

Let's fight it out.

Moving to the right.

The opponent had its wings oriented vertically.

At the momentary blind spot of time, I brought the rudders back.

With the ailerons, I angled myself further to the left.

I was also facing sideways.

Elevators.

It's coming.

Too close to shoot.

We passed by each other.

My body was pushed onto the seat.

When the nose pointed upward, I saw the opponent.

Not yet. His orientation was remaining the same.

I had my aircraft fly inverted.

Flaps, neutral.

Engine, full throttle.

The opponent pulled the elevators. It slowed down and I caught up with it.

I took the position right behind it.

It noticed my presence, and attempted to bring it back to the horizontal orientation.

It could have assumed the inverted flight. *Is the tendency to prefer the erect orientation a part of the instinct?*

To the right.

Putting on the brake with the spoilers.

It was within the shooting range.

Fire.

To the left.

Planting my feet firmly on the rudder pedals.

Fire.

Disengage.

While making a roll to the right, I descended.

At the moment, I saw smoke behind me.

I stopped the rolling and observed the perimeter.

I saw an enemy aircraft emitting smoke obliquely below me.

“Dead Eye, come down.” It was Kusanagi’s voice.

I took a deep breath. I found myself sweating.

“I am done with it just now.” I reported, after switching on the microphone.

“I see you. Right below you.”

I choked the engine and checked the gauges. I had the nose directed downward and dove while turning.

I soon found Kusanagi.

I took the position behind her and we flew horizontally to the west.

In about one minute, Tokino’s aircraft was ascending from below.

He positioned himself beside me, and raised his hand.

“What? Is his radio broken?” I mumbled. *Anyway, Kusanagi is today’s leader. I think Tokino is refraining from uttering jokes.*

We soon sank beneath the clouds and flew at the low altitude along the shore.

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We returned to the base one hour later. Kusanagi landed first, followed by Tokino, and then me in the end. I got off the aircraft and walked toward the office building, when Tokino was running from the adjacent hangar to me. His steps were light. *Well, I understand that, considering our achievement. Although the enemies were aircrafts of the new model, the three of us has just come back unhurt.*

“Will you meet Fuko tonight?” He asked.

“I knew you would ask me so.” I replied.

“You know, the expectation level is quite high.” He lowered the both edges of his lips.

I did not make the rule to go to Fuko's place whenever I shot down enemy aircrafts. If there were such a rule like that, then Tokino would be the one to make and implement.

"Honestly, I wanted to speak of that through the radio, though." He opened his eyes widely and continued with a theatrical gesture. "If I said anything vulgar, then I would be scolded by Ms. Kusanagi. Like, 'Do not taint my sky.'"

I reacted by snorting just for a moment.

"What do you think Sasakura said?" Tokino asked me even more.

"What did he say?"

"I told him that we shot down three new models of twin-engined aircrafts."

"You have violated the rule, if you talked about it with a mechanic."

"But he is special. Look, he said something like this. The pilots must have been new models as well." Tokino smiled. "That's funny. Don't you think?"

I did not think it was very funny, but I laughed only for him just for the sake of keeping the relationship going. Right after we came back from the sky, we were close to being in the state of getting drunk. Tokino was never intoxicated no matter how much beer he took, but he could become excited to this extent after the dogfight.

Of course, I was in a good mood. The two of us entered the office building, climbed up the stairs, and walked to Kusanagi's office. She had already changed her clothes and was waiting for us while sitting on a sofa. She was wearing a short skirt.

"My, oh my." Tokino said, while looking at her legs.

"What?" Kusanagi crossed her legs, and asked.

"Ma'am, were you flying with the skirt?" Tokino asked. Of course, it was supposed to be a joke.

We reported the outcome of the combat to each other. When Tokino fought at a lower altitude, he said the enemy aircraft mistakenly dove into the sea. Before that, his bullets might have hit the target. That was his humble report. Kusanagi's report was simple.

“I shot it while getting behind it.” She spoke, while showing their locations with her both hands. “This angle, maybe.”

“Is that all?” Tokino was laughing.

“Right. That particular type of aircraft is not cut out for being fighter aircrafts. I suspect that they are about to give up by now.” Kusanagi commented with a blank look. “I think the model is similar to Someaka. The wing area is too big, just because they are designed to be carrier-based.”

Someaka was the new model of aircraft for our company. It was used as a small bomber plane, or as a ground-attack aircraft. They were not so widely deployed yet. After the successful development of Sanka, it appeared at one point that the concept was being centered around designing a pusher configuration, middle-sized aircraft model.

I too explained how my aerial combat went. Only Tokino asked me questions. Kusanagi was just staring at me with her eyes squinted.

“I see. So, we are all dismissed.” She stood up.

Tokino and I stood up as well and made a slight salute.

“Ma’am, thank you for your time.” Tokino said. We were leaving the room.

Climbing down the stairs, we walked to the dining room as usual. Tokino chose beer to drink. I poured soda into my glass. Thanks to the thirst, the first glass was religiously delicious. I heard someone preparing lunch in the kitchen. No other pilot was here. Many of them might have gone out or been doing exercises, during that time of the day. *They are active in the morning and become cultural in the afternoon. The person who told me so was Tokino*, I remembered.

“As I said, she was in a bad mood, right?” Tokino whispered.

“What?” I asked back. It was when I just lit the cigarette. “Who was?”

While holding the glass of beer in his hand, he gave thumbs-up and pointed at the ceiling with the thumb. He seemed to be indicating Kusanagi. Did he think that Kusanagi was being sulky? She did not look that way to me. It was actually the opposite. I felt she was in a good mood, so I was a bit surprised.

“Although I myself went out, the one did not come.” Tokino whispered. *Kusanagi*

Theater, eh?

“Oh ...” His acting was avant-garde, yet I could understand it.

In short, is engaging in a battle with Black Cat Kusanagi's wish? To realize the encounter, the flight leader herself took off, but the dueling opponent that she desired did not show up. Of course, things could not possibly go so easily. We could not make a reservation with a telephone, or do something like that.

As I drank up the soda, I left the seat while holding the cigarette in my mouth. Tokino waved his hand just once. He seemed to be getting back to his usual non-adhesive nature. *I would rather take a nap than have lunch*, I thought. Still, I was not willing to sleep in a cold bed. *I wish I had a greenhouse, a sunroom, a rocking chair whose footrest was close to a fireplace, or something like that*, I imagined. There was no wind outside and the sunshine was warm to a certain extent. *If I sit down in a sunny place with the collar of my jumper turned up, could I be feeling warmer? But I wouldn't be able to sleep there.*

In Fuko's room, I might be able to have a good nap. The thought occurred to me. *I mean, only if Fuko is not there, of course.* Then, I was reminded of my parents' house, which looked like a mountain hut, and that woman's house with a henhouse, which Kusanagi said she also visited. I had the habit of forgetting others' names. What was her name? I was reluctant to recall it.

I could do nothing but return to my room and get in the bed. I did not dislike such a situation in which I had no other option. I was wrapped up in a blanket. The route I had flown earlier today was reproduced in my brain. When I was about to fall asleep, Tokino seemed to have gotten back to the room once. But I did not open my eyes and he left soon.

I slept for about three hours without even dreaming. It was still in the daytime. I felt hungry a bit. I thought of having some coffee, and decided to go to the dining room. Since I heard some engine sound, I took a detour toward the runway. Two Sankas had just taken off. *Who are the pilots?* I could not see even their numbers because they were looking silhouetted against the backlight.

I ordered coffee in the dining room and it was served immediately. It seemed to have been poured in the cup already in advance. Sitting on a seat by the window, I sipped the lukewarm liquid. Kusanagi climbed down the stairs and saw me from the

lobby. Our eyes met. She was coming toward me.

Kusanagi sat on a chair that was placed to my front over the table diagonally, took out a cigarette, and lit it.

“We need to talk about Sagara.”

“Sagara? Umm ...” It did not ring a bell.

“Honjyo.” She exhaled the smoke.

“Oh ...” By hearing her speech, I was reminded of the name for the first time in a long while. Even when I went there yesterday, I completely forgot the name. I could not have recalled it at the place, if I had tried. Even now, if I had not heard Kusanagi also visited the house, then I could not have recollected it smoothly like that. “Ah, yes, it was yesterday.”

“About how many times have you been there?”

“Well, five times, I think. Or, six times, maybe.”

“What is the reason?”

“Are you asking me the reason, ma’am?” I thought of it while looking up at the ceiling. *I wonder what the reason is.* I recalled what Tokino told me, but I should not have said it, of course. It was wrong. “At first, she came here. Err, was it a turkey? I remember she gave it to us.”

“And then?” Kusanagi squinted, and turned her cold gaze toward me.

“At the time, I talked a bit with her. It was in this dining room, with everyone else.”

An anniversary party was held at the base. It was a small party, at which we only had to make a toast. Nothing else. Not even music. I heard that the predecessor commander to Kusanagi threw a more flamboyant party. Kusanagi was a born pilot, and it was obvious that she disliked such a ceremony. More than half of the pilots would agree with her. But, such boisterous gatherings would please the mechanics and supervisors, who seldom came to the base. About three guests were attending the party in question. Two males and one female. Right, the woman seemed to belong to the information bureau and frequented to Kusanagi. I did not know her name.

Although I did not know how it happened, a person who seemed to be a family member of Honjyo, who had been shot down, brought several turkeys to the party. They were the main dishes. I just made the assumption at that point that she farmed turkeys.

In the middle of the party, the woman who brought the turkeys appeared. As a courtesy, all of us made a salute toward her. She introduced herself as Honjyo, but the relationship with her and the deceased Honjyo was not announced. In appearance, she did not look to be his younger sister. In short, she did not resemble Honjyo.

It means that he was already married, eh? Someone told me secretively. It was not Tokino. Because Tokino denied the credibility of the information. He said he could not believe that Honjyo was married with someone. I completely agreed with him. There hardly was a pilot who was married. Either way, we did not inquire into such circumstances. So, we soon broke away from the topic.

I wondered if Sagara, which Kusanagi had just mentioned, was her real name. *Why did she introduce herself as Honjyo? Does this mean that she had been married, and then has gone back to her maiden name recently?*

On the day of the party, I could talk with her for a short time. While snacking on raisins and drinking soda by a table at a corner of the room, I noticed that she was approaching me. She asked my name, and I introduced myself to her.

“Yes, I heard of you from Honjyo,” she said. Right, I was sure that was what she said. *Is it normal for anyone’s wife to refer to her husband with his family name?* At the moment, I came to the conclusion that she was not a family member of Honjyo’s, even if she might have been one of the related persons.

“How did he talk to you about me?” I had a bit of interest in the subject, and asked her about it. According to her, “He said you are the most ordinary person among the pilots at the airbase.”

“Ordinary?” I repeated the word. Probably, he meant I was a sane person of some sort. Because all others were not normal. In reality, I myself was not normal. I just hid my abnormality beneath the surface from others. *That’s all.* In other words, my main characteristic of introversion was facing inward mainly. I doubted that Honjyo had observed others earnestly. He was the very person who was an

unusually quiet, decent, normal man.

“At the time, she told me that she was living near the airbase.” I reminisced about the scene, and told Kusanagi. “I should have known. She brought turkeys to the base because she lived nearby, of course.” I said so and nodded. “If I remember right, I asked her if she was making her living by raising birds. Then, she said she wanted me to come see a henhouse once.”

“Henhouse?” Kusanagi repeated the word.

“Right. Honestly, I thought why I had to see such a thing at the time.” As I could recall it, as I remembered, I continued explaining straightforwardly. “But, by chance, I happened to pass by that area. Umm, ma’am, you know that road, don’t you?”

Kusanagi nodded slightly like a switch, and then raised her chin a bit to urge me to continue.

“Although it was a scenery I had always seen, I unexpectedly noticed the long roof and parked my car because I thought it might have been that house. I found a downward slope and went to that direction. Then, she was there.”

“How dramatic that is?” Kusanagi commented with a plain look.

“Well, it was an coincidence or something of the sort. I was a little surprised.”

“So?”

“That’s all, ma’am.”

“It was your first visit. How was the next?”

“On my second visit, I had already known the place. So, umm, I brought flowers to her. You know, for the first visitation, I was empty-handed.”

“You bought flowers?”

“People usually do so, I think.”

“For what purpose?”

“About the flowers? Well, I wonder for what they are.”

“I mean, for whom?”

“Oh ...” I nodded and took a breath. “If I was asked whether it was for the deceased or the living one, then it was the latter. You know, nothing could exist for the deceased.”

“Then, how was the next one after that?” Kusanagi asked.

“Wait a minute, ma’am. What is going on? Excuse me. Is it an inquiry session about my duty?”

“No, it is a matter of your private life.” Kusanagi answered, and looked back. She appeared to be looking at the kitchen. *She is probably checking that no one is listening to our conversation.* “I’m asking you personally. If you do not want to answer, you do not have to. If you feel that my attitude is oppressive, then you are misunderstanding my intentions.”

“No, I do not think that way ...” I might have smiled bitterly. But it did not last long. “I have not known even her name. May I ask what her name is?”

“Sagara.”

“Sagara, and what is her first name?”

“Aoi.”

“Really ... What is the relationship with Honjyo?”

“You do not have to know any information to such extent.”

“Understood.” I nodded immediately. I thought she was right.

“Do you want to insist you have no interest in her?”

“Interest ... I am not sure, but probably as you say. I do not have any special interest in her.”

“If so, why do you go there several times?”

“Umm ... Because she said she wanted me to come back again. So, when I drive through the area, I end up thinking I would drop by a little. That’s all.”

“Is it sympathy?”

“No, ma’am.” For some reason, I could deny it quickly. “I do not mean that. Also, I do not think I am doing something good. Of course, I am not doing anything bad, either.”

“I do not intend to say this and that about what you do. It is not my objective to evaluate you. I have one more question.” Kusanagi widened her eyes, and my mind was captured by the glow in her pupils like the sun at the North Pole. “Have you heard anything about me from her?”

“Oh? About Ms. Kusanagi ...? Well, ma’am, you too have visited there, right? Yesterday she told me about it.”

“And then?”

“Umm, if I remember right, I asked her the reason why Ms. Kusanagi came to her place.”

“What answer did Sagara give you?”

“Nothing in particular.” I shook my head. “Her answer was like ‘Well ...’ or ‘I wonder why.’”

Kusanagi was still glaring at me.

“Ms. Kusanagi, may I ask why you visited the place?” I asked. “It was not because of your duty, was it? It appears that it was not from sympathy.”

“I don’t want to answer.” She said, and took her eyes off me. “But ... I went there, not for Honjyo.”

“Roger. So, are we done?”

“Thank you.” Kusanagi was about to leave. But in the middle of standing up, she stopped. Then, she looked straight at me again, and apologized, “Sorry. I do not blame you for what you did, Kurita.”

I looked at Kusanagi’s face, and noticed her crow’s feet. She was looking exhausted. I thought the gleam of her eyes were stronger when I first met her.

“Yes, ma’am. I understand that.” I smiled. It might be my service for her. I did not dislike her, of course.

“Still, if possible ... I want you not to meet Sagara.” While squinting, Kusanagi spoke in a subdued voice. “It is not an order, but my wish.”

“For what reason?”

“It is because I don’t want to talk about it.”

“I do not understand what you are trying to tell me with that.” I hesitantly laughed.

“Do you need a reason?” Kusanagi was not changing her expression.

“No, ma’am.” I exhaled a bit. Then, I shook my head. “I will never go there again.”

“Thank you. I appreciate it.” Kusanagi said without changing her expression at all. She then left the dining room. I saw her throwing the cigarette into an ashtray in a lobby. She climbed up the stairs, and did not look back at me.

-5-

On the night, I went to Fuko’s place. It was at about 20:00 when I arrived at it. Uncharacteristically, I was with Tokino. It might have been the first time for us to get in one car together. I parted from Tokino at the foot of the stairs. I did not want to see what type of woman Tokino was about to meet. We did not talk about it in the car. Still, we talked about Suito Kusanagi’s bad mood since our having come back to the base. Tokino witnessed her kicking an empty box of cigarette, which was on the floor by the base of an ashtray in the lobby. The box was not the one Tokino dropped. Still, he picked it up and threw it into a garbage box.

“I wonder what it was. Probably, she was dealing with something like stress.” Tokino uttered.

“You know, she is in a position of high responsibility.” I chimed in properly.

Even in the Fuko’s room, Kusanagi’s face did not disappear from my head. I thought it was because her impression slightly differed from usual. On the other hand, Fuko was in the best mood ever. I knew it was because I came to see her for two consecutive days in a row.

“You simply cannot resist it, eh?” Fuko was smiling all over.

“No, that’s not what it is. The three of our aircrafts shot down three enemies in the morning.”

“Oh, that sounds great. The three of your aircrafts, you say? Tokino, and who? The two of you are here. Who has not come yet?”

“Ms. Kusanagi.”

“Oh ...” While widening her eyes and mouth, Fuko nodded slowly. “That girl. Yeah, she has come here just once.”

“What? When?”

“Umm, well ... I’m not sure. You know, I was wrong about that. Forget it, please.”

“How come?”

“You need not care about it.” She hugged me like margarine.

On the bed, I was still thinking about Kusanagi. I wondered for what purpose she had come here. Did she come to reprimand one of her subordinates? In the case, did she scold the man? Or, the woman? Umm, it does not matter either way. Surely, Fuko was right. *Why do I end up thinking about a subtle thing?* I wondered if it was equivalent to my trying to open a tightly sealed lid forcefully even when I did not have to open it.

I recalled Kusanagi’s legs sticking out from her skirt. They were as white as Fuko’s. But, thinner than Fuko’s. *Kusanagi had to be far lighter. Far lighter than by 1.5 kilograms, and beyond.*

While feeling the Fuko’s weight on me, I recalled what Sasakura was saying. “Do you know what part of an aircraft does the most wasteful movement?” He raised one of his eyebrows, and asked me.

Pistons inside an engine, I thought. Landing gears, or, shall I say, tires? They get inside and come out of the aircraft, and they are not related to the act of flying itself. If something is involved in the most wasteful motion, then that something has got to be the pilot, I concluded. While I kept silent, Sasakura gave me the answer.

“The biggest wastes are propellers.” He exhaled through the nostrils.

“Propellers are still important.” I said back.

“Think about it. Why are they rotating at such places? They are engaged in totally unrelated movements. It is the ultimate waste. Look at the birds. They have no propellers. Fishes do not have screws either, right?”

“But airplanes fly faster and are bigger than birds. Likewise, ships are larger than

fish ...”

“As of now, we need them as a temporary measure. However, I want you to understand that they are not the most ideally designed shapes.”

“I’m not sure, though. Oh, then, what part of a human body does the most wasteful movements?”

“Human body. Let’s see ...” Sasakura was thinking, with his arms crossed. His face, which was glaring obliquely at me, was relaxed suddenly. “Ah, right, here.” He raised a hand, and put his finger on the side of his head.

“Head? Really? I think it’s a heart.”

“Heart? I think hearts are designed logically, relatively speaking.”

“Do you think so? I think they are going pound-pound, and wasting energy in the movements, though.”

“Hearts are, after all, pumps. Pumps compress air, and send fuel to the engines. Isn’t it strange that such mere pumps are treated like the symbols of life? A bit mysterious. Their mechanism is simple and they do not contain too many parts. For example, compared to engines, they do not tend to break down easily.”

“Oh, you’re right. For airplanes, engines are treated most carefully with respect.”

“Engines are just muscles. Don’t you think so?”

“Really? Why is it that hearts and engines are the most important parts for humans and aircrafts, respectively?”

“It’s simple.” Sasakura angled one side of his lips obliquely, and put on an asymmetrical smile. “In short, the parts which make noisy sounds like ‘boom boom’ and ‘pound pound’ appear to be working the hardest. They generate the sounds because of the wastes of motion.”

I wondered if sound was the proof of wasteful movement. Things that make noise in such ways as rattling with jingle-jangle and fluttering with flip-flap, go too far, come back again, get rubbed on the way, and give off heat. Those which are shivering, frightened, and bluffing.

Certainly ...

Beautiful things are probably tranquil and stationary.

If they moved, they would do so slowly and silently.

While we fly, almost everything is lost in the roaring engine sound. Exceptions are the sound of the wings and fuselage scraping air, the creaking of the structure, the rickety control linkages, the control stick notches, and the slight flutters of the canard wings. They are as light as headache. Only to that extent, I suppose. In many cases, I feel that my own breath is noisier. The hoarse sound like winds are repeated near my ear, for some reason.

Oh, it's Fuko's breath, I recalled.

Kusanagi's would be quieter, I supposed. When closing my eyes, I saw the flight track of Kusanagi's Sanka.

“Oh ..., Jinro.” Fuko's hoarse voice called my name by ear.

I kept closing my eyes. Fixedly. The question of why I was in such a place was gradually looming larger. Fuko was not a bad person. For example, she was one of those few people who would not stress me out even when they were with me. There were hundreds of million times more of those who were not like that than those who were like her.

However ...

Even so, I sometimes ended up thinking I liked the time without her. Of course, I thought so when her body was touching mine. I guessed she was like a stove. I would like it to be near me, but I disliked it once I touched it.

“Hey, I like you.” Fuko said.

I stayed still. Without opening my eyes.

“Are you sleepy?”

I might be, I thought. Surely, I became sleepy and felt like taking a rest, each time I came here. I first thought it was a peaceful comfort. But I wondered if losing my consciousness was equivalent to a peaceful comfort. *Why do people say, “Rest in peace,” to the deceased?* Although I had the happiest time when I was in an aircraft, I never felt sleepy to the extent that I wanted to take a rest. So, to feel sleepy was different from the peaceful comfort. I occasionally felt that the air I had inhaled was

refreshing, and felt the slight pressure spreading in my chest or the vague warmth permeating into my body. Still, they were not anything peaceful. Even birds would fall downward to the ground if they stopped their wings. No bird could fly with tranquility. So, was sleeping on the ground deemed peaceful? I did not think so.

“Truly, I like you. It is the first time for me. To love someone.”

Maybe, Fuko would fall in love with anyone for the first time in every occasion. It must be probably because she is transparent like glass and has a docile heart. That was what I thought. Adults who lived ordinarily were far more impure than Fuko. More than anything, they lied to themselves. I live in order to do this job. I have the responsibility to love this one. They desperately try to make themselves believe so. They were on all fours and hopelessly clung to the ground.

They taught children this way: Scenery is beautiful. Animals are adorable. Friends are precious. Your homelands are nostalgic. Elderly people are gentle. Families are enveloped in love. Do not break off your smiles. Protect your children. Wars are acts of devils. Those blinded by money are demons. Confront violence with nonviolence. Cooperate with everyone. To join forces with others is noble. Humans are noble. Everything is love. Family love for children and parents can solve any problem. Shed tears by seeing beautiful things. Crying is the expression of your honest mind. Cry. And, be thankful. Thank God. You are not living alone. The world is one. Hold hands with others. Let's sing. Let's praise peace. Let's praise others' efforts. Ugly things are lust. Greed is evil. Wish yourself a small happiness. Seize the love nearby. Die in gratitude. Die while being surrounded by your family. Believe you have been loved. Have an illusion that you have been useful for others. Believe that everyone is your companion. Be deceived. Only by thinking so, you can be happy. It is God for all. Human beings are beautiful. The beauty is found in one's mind. Do not be deceived by appearances. Keep your mind pure. Be a good kid. Be an obedient child. Believe your teachers and parents. Adults worry about children. The love is from the bottom of their hearts. Truly they love you. You are a treasure. Our treasure. Really precious. Oh, how adorable. I love you. Hey, smile for me. Like me? Do you like me? Oh, my lovely. Please smile. I want to see your smile. Jinro, Jinro.

In the whipping sweet scent, however, I did not think any of these words were beautiful or correct. I did not think they were gentle. I could not believe, obey, sing, or laugh at them.

Adults teach children lies. Why? Because they know they are ugly. Since they have noticed their ugliness, they have something they do while hiding from their

children. Why do they go through the troubles doing such things while hiding from their children? Because they love to do ugly things. They are the ones who have to hide to do their favorite things. *Look, it is funny, right? You cannot help but laugh, can you? Yeah, it is helplessly funny. There is nothing which is funnier than this.*

I opened my eyes.

“Oh, you’re smiling.” Fuko said in front of my face. While making a big sigh, she leaned against me more closely. “Hey. Jinro, can I ask you something?”

“About what?”

“What do you think about me?”

“It’s a difficult question.”

“Why?”

“Umm.”

Is she asking me what I am now thinking she is? Or, is she asking me what I usually think she is? Which is she asking? I was giving thoughts about the type of question she was asking me. But, I came to the conclusion that either way was the same.

“Jinro, you’re honest.” Fuko said silently. She made a roll and turned over on her back beside me. But she seemed to be turning her face toward mine. My body became lighter as if the pressure was lost suddenly. *Comfortable*, I felt. Her hand was touching my chest and moving slowly toward my neck, though.

“Honest?”

“Yeah ... You know, you never say you like me.”

“Do people usually say so?”

“Umm, I’m not sure.” Fuko cracked up and chuckled for a while.

I guessed that she was thinking if she had slept with a normal man. It might be a funny theme.

-6-

On the night, I returned to the base with Tokino. It was already in the dead of

night. Of course, I did not drop by anywhere. I had promised Kusanagi about that point. It was getting late. In addition, I was not alone. I only glanced at the direction. In the complete darkness, I could see the light still turned on.

In the following morning, it was past 10 o'clock when I woke up. Tokino seemed to be still sleeping, so I got out of my bed as silently as possible. I put on a jacket and walked to the bathroom to wash my face. The water was cold. While I was brushing my teeth, Tokino appeared.

"I heard Matsunaga and Adachi could not make it back yesterday." He said in an undertone.

"What?" I was surprised a bit. "Really ..."

If I remembered right, they took off in the evening. I thought they would have already come back while Tokino and I were going out. Last night the atmosphere at the base was not unusual. Tokino said he would go to the dining room to drink more after getting back to the base last night. He must have heard the news at the moment. I soon fell asleep around that time, though.

He too started brushing teeth. I saw a roof of an adjacent building through the window. Maybe because of the way the sunlight lit the construction, it always looked warped. Several garden trees were standing beyond it and the runway could be seen over them. *It is tranquil now. No one is around there. With no cloud, the sky has cleared up.*

We said nothing for a while.

At times, our colleagues naturally disappeared like this. But it was not unusual, of course. It was a matter of daily occurrence. *It is similar to a sudden transfer from one workplace to another*, I thought. It was the same as Honjyo's case. It would have made at least a bit of difference if I could know in advance that they would disappear. However, because of the suddenness, we could accept it rather dryly. *It has got to be ordinary for someone to disappear suddenly.*

Matsunaga and Adachi were colleagues whom I barely knew the faces of. I was not so close to them. I just saw the two of them playing basketball a few times.

Naturally, I slightly wanted to know how they had fallen. If there was a pilot, who flew with them and had come back alive, then I would ask the one what had

happened. But, in not a few cases, all the pilots failed to come back alive in a mission. If things went down like that, we could not get the official information regarding what happened how and where. I wondered if Kusanagi knew the information. Rather, in almost all the cases, there would not be a sure source of information.

After rinsing my mouth, I asked Tokino.

“What account did you hear?”

“Umm.” He was still in the middle of the process of brushing his teeth. “They seemed to know the location. Above the ocean, though. However, there was no one who saw it.”

Well, that is likely to be the case.

“Do they not know the number of the enemies involved?”

“Two, I heard.”

“Really ...” I nodded.

Such information was probably obtained by observing with radar. There was no guarantee that it was correct with certainty. There could have been three or four.

“How is Ms. Kusanagi?” I asked.

“What?” He spat foam out of his mouth and raised his head. “What did you say?”

“How is Ms. Kusanagi doing?”

“What do you mean by how?”

“Was she in a bad mood?”

“I don’t know. I have not met her today, or heard anything pertaining to her. Why are you worried about that?”

“Well, nothing in particular ...”

It was strange to me that I asked him such a thing. So, I supposed that Matsunaga and Adachi encountered the one whose aircraft had the black cat marking on it and then were shot down by it. Kusanagi might have thought about the same thing and had regrets about the issue pertaining to it. I was almost certain that she would have thought so definitely. But there was no logic to this. Calmly speaking, it was just my

delusion. It would be rare that the same pilot flew for consecutive days to that extent.

I walked to the dining hall and had late breakfast. It was deserted. Just Tokino and I, alone in the space. For about one day after the human count went down, that was how it would go. Especially, those who were not pilots would become silent. They would walk while looking downward. The building itself was somewhat quiet and did not seem to make any noise with wind. The pilots themselves did not care too much. We would do no more than giving thoughts about when new personnel would be brought in. No one would recall this and that about the ones who had gone down. It was meaningless if we remembered them. In addition, we would end up envying them and even be jealous. Maybe, we just disliked the very notion.

One automobile was being parked in front of the main entrance and, through the window glass, I saw a woman getting out of it. She entered the lobby and climbed up the stairs. She seemed to be walking to Kusanagi's office. I saw her once in a while. She was Kusanagi's supervisor, apparently belonging to the information bureau. Tokino was also looking at the direction. Although I was not particularly interested in what was going on, I was sure Kusanagi was now in her office above us.

I stood up and returned the dishes. Tokino was still sitting and smoking. I left the dining room alone. When crossing the lobby, I heard Kusanagi's voice coming from the second floor. It was a loud voice that lasted for an instantaneity as if she was screaming, and I could not recognize what she said.

“No, nay.” She might have yelled.

It might have been “No way!”

Anyway, it was a negative overtone like that.

I stopped there. I could not hear anything beside that. I did not have the reason to wait there, and decided to go outside to walk toward the runway. It was not cold while in the sunshine.

What's a pity. I thought for a moment.

It was about Kusanagi. *Why is it so pitiful?* I was not sure. If so, it could not be helped because I felt so for some reason.

Maybe, I was making a comparison unconsciously. I mean, comparing the pilot version of Kusanagi in the past with the current version of Kusanagi. Those who knew both versions of Kusanagi, especially among the pilots, might have become very few as of now, I wondered. In other words, they had been depleted to that extent.

No matter how I thought about Kusanagi, it would have meant nothing at all. Whatever I thought, everything would become empty once I was shot down. *What we are thinking are, after all, like clouds in the sky. They are no more than what we can see the shapes of for the moment, only when we see them from the distance. On the following day, wherever and however I search for them by all so much, there cannot be the clouds assuming the same shapes. It would not have made any difference, if I think they had not existed from the beginning.*

I went to the hangar to see my own aircraft. Three mechanics were talking in front of the hangar. One was Sasakura, the other two were younger. The two men saw my face, and then walked away to different directions. Only Sasakura ended up waiting there and was assuming a facial expression of being blinded by the light.

“I have spare time. So, shall I check your engine?” Sasakura asked. “Is there something that is bothering you?”

He was not in charge of my aircraft. But I had let him examine mine once. When it came down to matters related to engines, mechanics here all respected Sasakura like a god. They seemed to consult with him about engine issues they could not solve by themselves. When they found something unclear, they always said, “I will ask Mr. Sasakura.” There was also an elderly chief mechanic, but it was obvious that even he relied on Sasakura. It meant that Sasakura had the skill. However, Sasakura was a bit of an oddball, and people around him communicated with him as if they were handling him with care. So did we the pilots. Of course, so did I, to a certain extent.

“As of now, there is no trouble. Except for the engine breathing. If it is fixed, then there will not be anything more that I ask for.”

“Ah, that one.” Sasakura curved his lips. “Of course, it is not that there is nothing that I can do, but it is delicate. If I make a mistake, I will end up getting it screwed up. If you give me some time to conduct experiments, I am confident about my solving it.”

“Screwed up? You mean the engine may be ruined?”

“That’s right. You know, I will have to punch holes here and there.”

“That sounds difficult.”

“There are human beings whose voices are hoarse. Same as that. If I punch holes on their necks around the throats, then their voices may get fixed.”

“Oh, really?”

“For example, Fuko.” Sasakura sniggered mildly.

I did not want to witness a hole being punched on Fuko’s throat, and I could not laugh.

Sasakura walked away toward a runway. He was probably thinking of crossing it to get to a hangar on the other side. I looked at his back for a while, and took a look inside the hangar whose shutter was raised by more than half of the entrance height. It was the hangar containing Kusanagi’s Sanka. I lowered my head and took one step inside. There seemed to be no one else here. Kusanagi’s Sanka looked somehow light, even if it was the same model of Sanka as mine.

Then, I looked up at the ceiling by chance. That model airplane was still stuck on a catwalk. I walked to a tool shelf at the back, and decided to climb a ladder beside it. I had to move a cart, on which two large wooden boxes were loaded, by tens of centimeters. It was a steel ladder attached to a wall. It was cold, and I felt that its rusty parts were soaked into my hand. I climbed it up, and went through the concrete floor of the catwalk. The upper surface of the catwalk was fully covered with dust, which meant that no one had climbed up here for a while. Still, miscellaneous things such as pipes, steel materials, and chains were placed, and they prevented me from walking smoothly. It took time for me to approach the model airplane. Since there was no window around the upper parts of the hangar, it was darker than the lower part of the building. A crane railing was right in front, and I was getting closer to it.

When I finally got my hand on the model airplane, I heard some people talking. They were in front of the hangar. Soon I noticed one of them was Kusanagi. The other was woman’s voice, too. They seemed to have come to the place and stopped by before the shutter. The two of them were both wearing skirts. I saw their legs

and their silhouettes were extended into the interior of the hangar.

Kusanagi ducked under the shutter and got inside. I instinctively leaned against a wall and hid myself in a blind spot.

“It is not what I want to hear, I suppose.” Kusanagi said.

“Is this your Sanka?” It appeared that the other woman was entering the hangar. It was that tall, slender woman, who had come to the airbase earlier.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“It must be your fourth aircraft, right?”

“Third, ma’am.”

“What a high-maintenance pilot.”

“It was the only thing I have demanded. I do not have anything I have demanded beside that.” Kusanagi said quickly. It was not the way in which she talked to us pilots. “Is anybody there?” Suddenly, she raised her voice.

I was shocked. I took a glance, and found Kusanagi looking at the back of the hangar.

There was no reply from the deeper part of the hangar. I kept myself silent as well.

What shall I do? I was getting in a bit of hot water. It was becoming hard for me to get out and show myself. I was expecting wishfully that they would leave the place before long. *I should be waiting for their departure, shouldn't I?*

“As far as I can see, these days Kusanagi has been losing the balance by slightly bit. You know, I am speaking honestly, as your friend that I am. Don’t get me wrong. Perhaps, is your physical condition in a bad shape?”

“Well, my condition is not good. But I think I’m not sick. Maybe, it is more mental than physical. I have to think about the base and about the team. They give me stress, I think.”

“But, in the early phase, you could do well. Am I not right?”

“I’m exhausted.”

“I can’t believe that Suito Kusanagi is saying such a thing. Why?”

“I myself do not know why. Well, I wonder why I think this way. If possible, could you appoint me to be just another pilot again? I think I will definitely be able to work more effectively that way.”

“I cannot do that.”

Silence.

Carefully, I looked downward. Kusanagi was standing beside the canopy before the main wing. The tall woman was still near the shutter.

“Humans cannot go back. No one can. Can adults become children?”

“As a pilot, I will never be beaten by anyone.”

“I think ... You know. Listen to me calmly. I think the opposite way. You should not get on it. At first, for a short period. Why don’t you do just the duty on the ground? I think you will settle down even more than now. Trying to do multiple things while being half-baked was not good for you. It causes your stress.”

“I have been telling you so from the beginning!” Kusanagi’s voice became louder. “I knew that. I would never fit into this work. Oh ...” Her voice was shivering. “Everything is lost, going down and ruined.”

“Kusanagi, calm down.” The woman was approaching Kusanagi. “Anyway, so ..., why don’t you take a break for a while?”

“I think it would not be effective.”

“Since you just lost two colleagues, you might be getting irritated.”

“No, not at all. Ma’am, it is just a daily event.”

“I am guessing that you regret not having flown for yourself, right?”

“Yes, I do regret so.”

“I want to tell you that it is not good.”

“Why, ma’am? If I did it for myself, I would have definitely shot down the enemy and come back.”

“Thinking that way gives you stress. Well then, for example, besides becoming a pilot once again, what do you think you should do?”

“Let’s see ...” Kusanagi sighed. “Unfortunately, I cannot come up with what to do, a solution to the problem. Someday in the future, I will not be able to carry out my duty. I’m sure of that. Ma’am, can I do nothing but quit this job?”

“So, can you wait for a while to make the decision?”

“If I wait, you think the situation would improve, correct?”

“Correct.”

“Ma’am, how can you be so optimistic?”

“I do not know why.” The woman sighed as well. “Um, but, I believe in you. At least, I want you to know this.”

“Now, that Suito Kusanagi, on whom you have been betting, investing, and counting, has been depleted. I think it is time for you to give up on me.”

“Do not say such a thing, please.” The woman was letting her voice quiver, too. “Please ..., okay? I want you to recover your good humor.”

“I am not in a bad mood, ma’am.”

“Not in a good mood. You are angry.”

“Yes. Sorry about that. But ...”

Silence prevailed for a few seconds.

“But?”

“No, nothing.”

As Kusanagi said so, she walked away from the aircraft, ducked under the shutter, and went outside. Her shadow was moving. The tall woman followed Kusanagi, and also got out of the hangar. The shadows of the two vanished into the distance soon, and everything in the place stood still again.

While holding the model airplane in my hand, I climbed down the ladder carefully. When I landed onto the floor, I took a look at the model again. Dust was accumulated on the paper of its main wing. Its propeller was made from resin. As I span it with my fingers, I noticed that its rubber band still had the elasticity left in it.

I went outside. The direction of the runway was bright. A vehicle, a bit far away from me, was moving and pulling a cart. Other than that, I saw no trace of human.

While spinning the propeller with my finger, I was walking toward the runway. *The wind is starting to blow*, I felt. Although the wind speed was too weak to affect a real aircraft, it would cause this small airplane to drift.

I did not make a count. When I was a small kid, I would wind the rubber band while counting the rounds. *Why have I become such a sloppy person?* I thought.

I checked the angle between the main wing and the tail assembly, and then released the model airplane into the sky. I did not try to be too greedy about increasing the takeoff angle.

The propeller was revolving, and its torque made the airframe lean on one side. Still, it was moving forward powerfully. Ascending to the upper-left obliquely.

Walking toward it, I was looking at it.

I like that.

Indeed, aircrafts are always good.

Far better than human beings.

When I was a child, I let a model airplane fly for the first time in a grassland. My dad assisted me. *Ah, I remember.* A dog was with me. Syrup was the name of the dog, whose hair was long. It always left its mouth open, and stuck out the tongue. *That's right.* Even when it died, the tongue was put out.

When the airplane climbed to the high place, its rubber band went slack, and its propeller stopped. It started gliding. This time, it turned to the right.

After the dog died, my mom disappeared as well. She left the home. It was quite a mystery, considering the fact that she had been so gentle to that extent. She used to praise my dad so much. I could not ask my dad about the reason. I was getting the impression that the reason for the dog's death and the reason for my mom's disappearance were what I was not supposed to ask about, to the similar extent to each other. To put it another way, I knew it would induce too much pain to explain that sort of thing to children. I did not want my dad to feel tormented while trying to explain it to me.

I chuckled. *What a nice kid I am.*

Why am I such a good kid?

For whom am I being a good kid?

Who on earth is looking at me?

God?

I have not believed in God, not even once. If God existed, my dog would not have had to die and my mom did not have to leave home. Am I wrong?

The airplane continued to glide, and then plunged into the trees near a warehouse. I walked slowly toward the location. At the foot of a tree, I looked up at the upper part. While changing angles, I was looking toward one direction after another. Finally, I found a part of the aircraft getting entangled with a branch at a high position.

“This time, it is caught by a tree ..., eh?”

Was it happier for it to be in a hangar? It would be finished in the new place, once it rained. Even so, the final flight was really something. I believed that it would find the silver lining in getting the opportunity to fly just once more.

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Several days after that, I drove alone to a café at the edge of the town. I was somewhat bored. I had nothing to buy. Fuko's place was distant and I did not want to go there. Although I slightly wanted to see that woman who was feeding birds, I kept that notion away from my consciousness because of my promise with Kusanagi.

I sipped bitter coffee at a table of the café, and read magazines. Most articles were not new to me and I was not sure about what countries many of the articles were about.

I felt the presence of someone, and looked up to find a man standing in front of me. That was an unknown face.

“Mr. Kurira, nice to meet you. Here is my card.” He held out a business card. I received it and read the texts on it. He was a reporter of YA Newspaper Company. His name was Somanaka.

“Why do you know my name?” I asked.

“I am a big fan of Captain Kusanagi. If possible, I want to write an article about her. You know, if I get the permission, though.”

“Whose permission?”

“Of course, Captain Kusanagi’s.”

“I think that would be impossible.

“Ah, yes ...” Somanaka distorted his face and nodded. “Well, sir, may I ask you some questions for a short while?”

“Sorry, you have yet to answer my question.”

“Oh? Ah, right ...” He scratched his head. He sweated on his forehead. *What’s wrong with him? Is the heater in this place getting too hot? Or, has he run to come here from somewhere?* “Well, I visited the base on the public open day. At the time, Mr. Kurita guided visitors in a corridor, right? Then, I later asked Ms. Kusanagi about who you were.”

“How come?”

“You seemed to talk with Captain Kusanagi friendlily.”

“Did I?”

“Yes.”

“I am not that close to her.”

“Still, I heard that you seemed to have been with Captain Kusanagi for quite a long time.”

“The same team, always. Rather, she is my supervisor.”

“When Captain Kusanagi became the commander and was assigned to this base, only Mr. Kurita was transferred along with her, correct?”

“Yes. And with two mechanics.”

“Is it because they were closely acquainted to her?”

“No, that’s not correct.”

“What do you think about Captain Kusanagi as a commander?”

“Umm, do I need to answer that? Or, do I have to carry out the duty to do so?”

“No, sir. It is not an official interview. So, do as you like. I would not make an article out of this soon. And, needless to say, I have to get your permission before making any written texts public. Simply, in this occasion, it is just an easy question based on my curiosity.”

“I do not understand that well. What merit will I have because of that?”

“Well, let me buy you coffee.”

“It that the merit?” I might have laughed a bit. It would have been a contemptuous laugh.

“Otherwise ..., yes, I might give you some information that Mr. Kurita wants to know.”

“Oh, what I want to know? I do not have anything in particular that I want to know ... Ah, that’s not true. I want to know to what direction the engine of Sanka will evolve. But the information is confidential, right?”

“Umm, it is not a field that I specialize in. For example, let’s see ... Sir, you know Ms. Aoi Sagara, right?”

“Ms. Sagara?” I was a bit cautious, and remained silent as not to let my face show anything.

“Did you know that she was a childhood friend of Ms. Kusanagi’s?”

“Really?”

“Yes. They are from the same region. They are of the same age, I believe.”

“Well, I did not know that.”

I was glaring fixedly at the man in front of me. He did not look to be a very bad person. He took out a handkerchief and started wiping the sweat. I was seeing the parking lot of the café through the window. I wondered what vehicle Somanaka drove to get here.

Of course, even if Sagara and Kusanagi were childhood friends to each other, the fact would not affect me in particular. *Has Kusanagi hidden the truth from me? No, she did not tell me about it just because she did not have to. To all appearances, Kusanagi looks much younger. It is because she is a Kildren.*

On the other hand, Kusanagi asked me not to see Sagara again. I guessed that she did not want me to know her past. Which made me understand the behind-the-scene storyline, more or less. In the context, the information Somanaka just gave me was valuable to a certain extent.

“Thank you so much.” I said, and stood up.

I walked toward the section by the wall, and got the magazine back to a rack. Then, I approached the counter and paid the master. The cash register was placed near the entrance, and I intended to make sure that the master did not have to bother getting there.

I returned to the table again, and picked up my scarf draped over the chair.

“Sir, are you leaving now?” Somanaka asked while standing up. “Our conversation is still ...”

“Still?” I looked back and stared at him.

“Umm, I mean, it still is in the middle. Well, you know, if possible, I would like to ask you some more questions.”

“Oh, but, I have nothing to talk about and to want to know.”

“Really ...” He did not hide his disappointed look.

“Today I need to go back now. I have no time.”

“Ah, I see. I am sorry to bother you. So, I hope you will allow me to have the next opportunity ...”

I stopped looking at him and walked toward the entrance door. I heard steps following me. But I got outside through the door, without looking back.

“Mr. Kurita.” I was called to stop.

I could do nothing but stop, and looked back.

“It is about Ms. Kusanagi. Well ..., I’m worried about her.”

I kept silent. I was not being inquired about anything. I was not asked to do anything. I had nothing that I wanted to talk about. To start with, I wondered if this man was trying to have a conversation. I even had doubts about that point.

“Sir, I want to do something. I mean, I would like to manage to save her. No, it is

not a proper way of telling you this. How shall I say this ...?”

“Do you have anything to tell me now?”

“Sir, I would like you to talk more with me someday.” Somanaka lowered his head. “Please.”

“If it is worth doing so.” I answered.

He nodded. No more word came back.

I walked to my automobile and sat in a cold seat. *Engine ignition initiated.*

The steering had also gotten cold. Still, the gravel beneath the car crackled, and the vehicle started moving. He was still standing on the steps in front of the café.

My car got onto a road and ran toward the direction of the base. No oncoming car. Even in the rearview mirror, I could only see the scenery being absorbed into the distance.

Worry, eh ...?

I was thinking about it.

That man has got to be liking Suito Kusanagi.

That's all.

He took out the refined word “worry”, as if it had been stored in the deepest part of a drawer. I guess he wanted Kusanagi to witness the image of him worrying about her.

After all, the creatures called adults have just the motive for being liked by others. So, they only approach those who could like them. Were they born that way? Or, has it become the only thing that is still functioning within them? To put it another way, other various feelings must have rusted away in time.

The interesting sensation of touching an insect. The refreshing feeling of pulling up a weed by the root. The excitement of jumping off from a high place. The adults have ended up regarding such feelings as wasteful for them. Those are the adults that are made as a result. *They probably have become docile, maybe.*

Then, what are the things that are not the wastes to them? Only the things that give them benefits. Only the things that like them and that give them pleasure. Only those things would be the

objectives in their lives. They are women, money, honor, and something else.

Well, how boring they are!

What makes them even more boring is the fact that the features of women are no more than their outer physical shapes. Money and honor are just the shallow, external effects on the surface, as the results of adults being able to control others at will.

Still, they are not bad.

Somanaka, too, was probably a good man.

He is a bit crass, though.

I should leave him alone. He is harmless.

The tires were rumbling. While driving on a road, whose center line broke off at times, I started regaining my composure. *Was I being angry?* I finally noticed it.

If so, what was I angry at?

The vulgarness of adults?

No, such matters are as commonplace as withered weeds or spider webs we can find everywhere. Even if they are ugly, they could not make me angry.

What was the reason?

Is it because it was the matter related to Kusanagi?

I believed so.

However ...

I had no idea. *Why did I have to get angry about Kusanagi?* In reality, the feeling had dissipated by now.

I will stop thinking about it.

If I thought about it, it would only end up making things complicated.

Anyway, all the relations on the ground are twined around with each other.

Episode 2: Immelmann Turn But in middle age, because of the false assumption that it is a period of decline, one interprets these lifesigns, paradoxically, as signs of approaching death. Instead of facing them, one runs away; one escapes - into depressions, nervous breakdowns, drink, love affairs or frantic, thoughtless, fruitless overwork. Anything, rather than face them. Anything, rather than stand still and learn from them. One tries to cure the signs of growth, to exorcise them, as if they were devils, when really they might be angels of annunciation.

This excerpt is from *Gift from the Sea* by Anne Morrow Lindbergh

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The ice that was freezing fallen leaves within them still remained at the bottom of the gutter in the afternoon. I and Tokino took off early in the evening. Gaining the altitude instantly, we flew toward the south by about 100 kilometers. After that, we continued the boring, straight flight for a while to guard a four-engined flying boat. At the point almost exactly half of our flight range, others ascending from an aircraft carrier took over our role, and we started returning to the airbase. It was a mission in which we had almost nothing to worry about except for the fuel.

However, an accident happened when we were getting close to the base. At first, I thought it was the malfunction of the compressor. In fact, the temperature sensor seemed to be going out of order. The engine of my aircraft was about to be overcooled.

“Is it frozen?” Tokino asked me through the radio.

“No, if it froze, then the opposite effect should occur.”

“Ah, I see ...”

“Anyway, I will lower the altitude.”

Luckily, I was flying above the ground and already in a safe zone. I could talk with the airbase and Tokino’s aircraft through the radio.

“Okay, I will accompany you.” Tokino said. “Almost there.”

We lowered the altitude to 500. I thought it would be dangerous if I slowed the rotation of the engine. So, I lowered the flaps, raised the nose of the aircraft, and let it fly while keeping the throttle tend to the open condition. Next, I started worrying about the fuel.

“How’s it going? Will it make it?”

“I’m not sure.”

I was ready for the worst case. *In case of the emergency, I would escape from the aircraft, or look for the place to attempt the landing.* Naturally, I had already chosen the latter option. So, I was flying while looking mainly downward. Although the sun had already set, it was not completely dark yet. I could see what was where. When I found a relatively spacious place, I thought of giving up and landing on the spot. *If possible, I want to land on a grassland.* But in reality, there was no such a smooth ground. It would have the unevenness with trees and rocks. The surer bet would be to land on a riverside or on a road.

The engine was about to come to a halt. The propeller was shaking so strong that I thought it might be blown away. I heard a small popping explosive sound from the back of my aircraft. I managed to control the throttle, as if I was cheating my way through it. It was as if I was here to kiss the rear end of the engine rather than to fly the aircraft.

“If things go this way, the gas may run out first.” Looking at the meters, I said.

“You should land on a road.” Tokino made the suggestion. “Over that forest. We will soon reach the road that we usually use on a daily basis.”

“Yeah, I know that road.”

“You can land on it.” Tokino said. “I will fly ahead of you and warn those

automobiles to get out of there so that we can make room. If anything, you prefer doing that before it becomes completely dark, right?”

I raced the engine, and let the aircraft turn. I raised the altitude a bit and then adjusted the course. It would be risky when I slowed the rotation of the engine. It could actually stop. I was worrying that this irregular vibration would cause some of the other parts to malfunction.

Tokino contacted the base for me with the radio. Once the fuel ran out, I would not have to worry about the aircraft catching fire and it would be safer that way. I had never landed on places other than runways. Still, I was not worrying about anything. The state of my mind was rather mysterious. More than that, I was thinking about how I could get back to the base from the would-be landing site. I soon noticed that someone would just pick me up, and the very thought made me burst into laughter. *Fair enough. They would have to retrieve it. How will they transport it?* I was even beginning to think about such a thing.

I confirmed the location of that particular road. When I was about to approach it after turning, the engine finally stopped with a sharp pop sound.

Suddenly, it became silent. The altitude was 400. I had no choice but to take a short cut. I lowered the altitude in an instant. While gaining momentum, I entered the final turn.

“Don’t allow it to stall.” Tokino advised.

I let my aircraft skid obliquely. When it nearly scraped against the telephone pole and reached the space above the road, the altitude was less than 20.

The landing gears are down.

Tokino’s aircraft was flying above me. I did not see any headlight of automobiles. I rarely saw vehicles on this road.

The flaps are down.

I adjusted the orientation of the airframe to keep it straight, with the rudders and ailerons.

I repeated this procedure, to the left and then to the right, alternatingly.

Just a little bit.

The altitude was lowered gradually.

The road was still straight.

No obstacle.

Almost there.

The tire of the right landing gear touched the ground.

The airframe was floating.

Once again, the right landing gear touched the ground.

I heard the rumbling sound.

The left landing gear also touched down on the ground.

The wheels are rolling.

The airframe danced.

Is the road surface supposed to be uneven to this extent? I thought.

I lowered the nose of the fuselage.

The front landing gear touched the ground.

Braking.

The aircraft hopped twice.

I controlled the rudders desperately with my both feet.

There was nothing left for my both hands to do.

I was just leaning the control stick forward.

“That was so skillful of you.” Tokino complimented.

Stop immediately, I begged in my mind.

I saw headlights ahead of me.

An automobile was coming.

Probably, the driver can see me.

I looked back, and I could see nothing. To begin with, no one could catch up on me moving at such a high speed.

I decelerated by quite a bit.

Now I was going as fast as an automobile.

The vehicle ahead of me pulled over toward the shoulder of the road, and was stopping.

I passed by the car, while seeing it to my left.

In the end, I pulled over as much to the right side as possible, and it stopped.

“Done.” I reported.

“Awesome. Do you want Fuko to pick you up?”

“No way. How can I expect that?”

“Someone will soon pick you up. So, stay there, okay?”

“Roger.”

I did not see where Tokino’s aircraft was flying. The sky which I looked up at from the ground was far darker than I had imagined. Since the sound was fading away, he was probably flying toward the airbase.

When I opened the canopy, the moist air around the ground entered the cockpit. I removed the goggles and turned off all the switches. The fuel was almost empty.

I had trouble with removing the seatbelt. It was as if my hand suddenly became awkward. *Or, is anything getting stuck somewhere in the middle?*

“Ouch.” I pulled back my hand.

My fingertip touched the cams of the seatbelt stopper. Anyway, the metal fitting was removed.

I got my head out of the cockpit. I looked back. There was no more vehicle that was pulled over to the shoulder of the road. Did he run away, after being surprised? Or, did he not want to be involved in this incident?

I had a slight pain at the back of my neck. *It might be a headache.*

I stood up, and got on the main wing. Then, I jumped off to the ground. I walked toward the rear part of the aircraft to take a look at the propellers. *No anomaly here.* I looked below them and checked the ground around the landing gears. Although I

was worrying that the struts might have been warped, they seemed to be undamaged.

The wind was fairly cold. With the collar turned up, I looked around. No headlight could be seen on the road, forward or backward. I could barely see objects in the distance with the faint sunlight. I wondered where I was. The same scenery stretched into the distance. I was sure that I was on the near side of a river. I imagined it was about 40 kilometers away from the base. As Tokino mentioned, Fuko's house was closer. When I thought so and looked back naturally, I saw two lights approaching me.

-2-

A white small truck was parked in front of me. The door for the driver's seat opened. A pair of brown boots and the skirt appeared in that order, and a woman stepped onto the ground.

"Mr. Kurita?" She called my name, and then I focused my eyes on her face. "What's going on? Is it a drill? Or ..., is it an emergency landing?"

"I feel relieved. You are not referring to it as a crash." I smiled.

After making the reply, I tried to recall her name. *Err, what is it? Ah, I heard the name from Kusanagi.* But I could not recall it. It was an emergency. Moreover, I had not been able to expect her to appear in front of me at all. *Oh, come to think of it, she lives nearby.* Kusanagi asked me not to meet her again. Even though it was a matter of privacy, I understood it was an order from my superior. But, in this particular case, I was not here to see her by design. The malfunction of my aircraft was unavoidable, and she must have appeared here just by chance. I could not turn her away. We had already made the contact. I was imagining such logics of this and that.

"No injury? Are you okay?"

"Yes, quite definitely." I put my finger in my mouth. "It seems that I cut my fingertip while removing the seatbelt. But, that's all."

She sighed. Then, she gazed fixedly at my aircraft. I too looked at my Sanka. The vicinity was becoming dark completely. *Very tranquil.*

“Have you made any contact with the airbase?” She asked. “Shall I get back to my house and make the phone call to the base?”

“The one who flew with me had already contacted the base. I think they will be here soon.”

“Aren’t you cold? Feel free to come to my truck.”

“No, I’m okay.” I replied. I was wearing a flight suit. It was much colder in the sky than on the ground.

“But ...” She covered her mouth with both hands. “I am the one feeling the chill.”

“Oh, fair enough. Sorry about that.”

“I’ve got hot coffee. Would you like to drink it?”

“In the truck?”

“Yes, in the truck.”

We crossed the road and got into her truck. She started the engine immediately, in order to have the heater work. The space around my feet got warmer in an instant. Then, she twisted her body and started searching for something around the rear seat. I put my body near the window so that I would not interfere with her. Her hair was bouncing near me.

“Oh, here it is.” She took a canteen, and sat straight on her seat. “It might have gotten a bit cold, though.”

“Where have you been?” I asked just to be polite.

She looked at me, paused only for a moment, and then smiled after a delay. Her white teeth were visible.

“To the seashore.” It seemed to be the answer.

It was about 10 kilometers from this area to the shore. There were many rocky stretches near the vicinity. There were also two fishing ports, although they were slightly far away. *She might have visited there*, I guessed. *Dose she load fish or something on the back of the truck?* *Ah, she might use them as feeds for her birds*, I imagined. But I did not bother to look back at the load-carrying platform or to ask her about it.

I drank the coffee with the cup of the canteen. It was warm enough. In addition,

sweet enough. Probably, she made it for herself. As for her in the driver's seat, she was sitting with her back on the door, while facing me. She was staring fixedly at me. I could say she was looking as if she was observing me. There was only one cup for the canteen, so we could not drink simultaneously. When I drank about half of the canteen capacity, I gave it back to her. But, she declined it.

“I have already drunk it.”

It was still quiet outside. No vehicle was on the road. I wondered how much time had passed. It might have been only 10 minutes after the crash landing. But I felt as if one hour had passed after I got into the truck.

I kept silent. Probably, I was worrying about the promise I made with Kusanagi. When I asked her about where she had been, I felt that the heart was beating more loudly than usual. As if it was warning me.

“You are quiet.” She said. “You are exhausted, aren't you?”

“No ...”

“I wonder how you feel, when you are flying. And then, when you come back to the ground again.”

“Umm, depending on the situation.” I replied. After uttering the response, I regretted that it might have been too brusque. “But, I feel better when flying. When I return to the ground level and get off the aircraft, I surely feel that my body becomes heavier. What I wear for the aviation is also heavy ... So, I want to remove it immediately, take a shower, and sleep.”

“Do you feel that way even now?” I felt her eyes were widened slightly.

“Yes, I do.”

“Would you like to come to my house? You can use a shower.”

“Um, no. That's not what I meant.”

“Oh ...” She opened her mouth a bit while showing a surprised look, and then lifted her hand to apply it on her lips. “Sorry. Umm, it is I who did not mean that.”

I handed the empty cup back to her. Her white hand took it.

I looked forward. I took my eyes away from her. It was completely dark outside.

In the darkness, I recognized my Sanka. Then, the silhouette of the forest in the background was barely indicating the brightness of the sky by showing the contrast. *Is the moon in the sky? Are stars there?*

The traces of the wipers were left on the windshield. *Not beautiful. Compared to her house, they are not beautiful.* On a dashboard, a magnet paper clip that was securing receipts was attached. Below the seat, a dry engine sound echoed. The air that was warmed by the radiator.

How is Tokino doing now? He should be reaching the airbase by now. Where is the rescue team right now?

Her hand touched mine. My hand was probably being dropped at the left edge of the seat. That reminds me. It was the hand that had been caressing the engine in a bad mood earlier. The hand was still being left at such a place. Her hand was warm like oil. Rather, my hand might be cold.

“Mr. Kurita.”

“Yes?” I turned my face toward her.

“I have something to talk to you about.” She said.

I kept silent. *What shall I say?* I could not understand what type of conversation it was going to be unless I listened to her. I could not say I did not want to hear it, if I did not understand it. Still, at the time, I did not want to hear the words she was intending to give off from her mouth. I had such a premonition. The thumb of my right hand might have twitched a bit. It was the finger to pull the trigger for shooting a machine gun.

I was looking at her lips.

Her white front teeth appeared for a moment, but they were hidden once again.

Her topic must be about Suito Kusanagi, I guessed. I heard they were childhood friends. Whoever gave me the information was, oh yes, that newspaper reporter.

“May I ask you a question?”

“About what?”

“What is life for you all?”

I came close to laughing. The question was too strange. It was like a dove taking off from a magician's hat. *Why are you conjuring up the dove from such a place now?*

“What do you mean?”

“I cannot imagine life without aging. It is beyond the comprehension of us ordinary humans.”

“We share the same ability to imagine.”

“Yes, but ...”

“Simply put, is it because that is something new?”

“It might be the case.”

“Since we see many elderly people, we can imagine the very notion of aging. But it is an external issue. How you feel and what you think about when you age are the matters in unknown realms for anyone, I think.”

“Right.” She nodded slowly. “If you remain in the current status, it is easier for you to imagine your future. That’s what you mean, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, maybe.”

“If you start aging, how will you start thinking about it?”

“What do you mean?” I asked back.

“Kildren ... Oh, if you don’t like the terminology, I apologize.” She looked at me. I shook my head without expression. I did not care about it at all. I could not even understand why she would worry about such a thing. “I mean, I want to ask how you will feel, once you cease to be a Kildren.”

“Well ...” I leaned my head just a bit. “I have no idea. I have never experienced it and never imagined such a thing.”

“Is it equivalent to our inability to imagine eternal life?”

“I’m not sure.”

“For example, what will you do, if there is a drug to enable you to become something other than a Kildren?”

“What will I do?”

“For example, will Mr. Kurita take it? Will you choose to become a being that is not a Kildren?”

“I think I won’t.”

“What makes you think so?”

“I want to pilot an aircraft.”

She nodded slightly, while staring at me.

I was desperately thinking about why she asked me such a question. *What on earth is this situation about?* I could not imagine that at all. *To begin with, who is she?* I noticed that such basic parts were lacking the information from my point of view.

“May I ask you a question?” As a counter, I asked her.

“Sure, of course.” She put on an artificial smile momentarily. “Do you mean why we are talking about such a subject?”

“That’s also what I mean. Moreover, I want to know how such a topic is related to you ... Err, I mean, I don’t think you are asking just out of curiosity ...”

“Maybe, just out of curiosity.” She replied. “But, it’s my job.”

“Job? What do you mean by ‘job’ ...?”

“I conduct such a research.”

“Research?”

“Yes, that’s my job.”

“What type of research?”

“Well, umm, I can say it’s a kind of biomedical.”

I could not specifically imagine what it was exactly. Moreover, I could not understand the meaning behind her doing such a job. If she referred to it as a job, then it meant that someone paid her the wage.

“Do you belong to a research facility somewhere?”

“I used to.” She nodded. “Now, I’m a freelance. But my research is getting the grant money from the government.”

“Oh, that’s great.”

“I’m not sure ...” She showed that patented artificial smile. It was the face she had not shown me when we had met previously.

“And then?”

“About Captain Kusanagi, I, umm ..., as a friend, and as a scientist, am worried about her. So, I want to ask you, Mr. Kurita, for your cooperation.”

“What worry? What cooperation?”

I heard a car running. *Behind the truck.* She checked the rearview mirror. I looked back. The headlights were approaching. *More than just a single car.*

“It seems that they are here to pick you up.” She said. “Do you think I should leave?”

“I have no idea.”

“Did Captain Kusanagi tell you not to meet me?”

“I cannot answer that question.”

“I knew it.”

“About what?”

“Get out.” She was becoming expressionless. I felt that the tone of her voice was very cold. “Next time, I will tell you the rest of the story.”

“When?”

“Whenever.”

I got out of her truck. After I closed the door, the truck moved onto the road and left the site. The headlights approaching from the opposite direction made the place around me brighter.

-3-

In two hours, I was back to the base. My aircraft had yet to return home. Kusanagi was out and absent. I felt deflated about that.

I met Tokino in the dining room, joined by a few companions, and we had a conversation for about 30 minutes. Although they praised my landing, I did not

think so at all. If anything, I was worried more about how I could take responsibility for not being able to get the aircraft back to the base.

It was a little past 10:00 p.m. when Kusanagi came back to the base. I noticed her return from the sound of the vehicle. Tokino was already sleeping and I was wrapping myself with a blanket. I had not turned off the light of the room yet. After a while, as I expected, I heard the footsteps approaching the room, and there was a knock on the door.

I got out of the bed and walked to the door to open it. It was unlocked. When I opened the door, I saw Kusanagi in her coat standing.

“Were you sleeping?” She asked.

“No, ma’am. I was about to, though.”

“Will you make the mission report tomorrow?”

“Anytime.”

“Then, in five minute. Come to my room.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Tokino did not wake up. I changed my clothes, got out of the billet, and headed for the office building. It was severely cold outside. The light of the dining room had been turned off already.

I climbed up the stairs, and noticed that the door was already open. I was about to knock the opened door. But, Kusanagi, standing beside the desk at the back of the room, was already looking at me.

“Excuse me, ma’am.” I stepped into the room. “Shall I close the door?”

“That would be better. It’s getting cold.” Kusanagi replied.

I waited while standing beside a sofa. Kusanagi put the document in her hand onto the desk and walked toward me. She showed me a sofa with her hand and sat on another one. As always, she crossed her legs. She was wearing a pair of black boots.

“I have heard most of it.” She said. “Due to the conference, I could not go to the site.”

“When will the aircraft be back?”

“During tonight, before dawn.” She answered. “They are now working on it.”

“I’m relieved.” I nodded.

“You made a proper decision.”

“It was Tokino’s decision.”

“Yes.” Kusanagi nodded. “Did someone living nearby come to witness the scene?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I heard a truck was there.”

“Right.” I nodded. I could not keep it secret. “Well, that particular woman we both know.”

“Woman?” Kusanagi squinted, and raised her chin. In two seconds, she closed her eyes once. Then, she looked at me again. “You mean, Sagara?”

“Yes.”

“I see. It was near her house.”

“She seemed to happen to pass by the place.”

“So, that’s why she took off and ran away immediately.”

“Ma’am?”

“She must have thought that I would be there.”

“Why did she have to run away?”

“Well ... I guess that I am disliked.”

Silence. I was looking at the toe of her left boot. It was almost touching the table.

“What were you talking with her about?” She asked.

“Pardon me?”

“You were conversing with her about something, weren’t you?”

“Yes, we were.” I raised my face. I accepted Kusanagi’s heavy gaze. I had already decided to talk honestly, rather talk accurately, if she asked me once again.

“It has nothing to do with Kurita.” Kusanagi’s voice became a bit more silent. I felt something uncomfortable about the way her words appeared to deal with some kind of resistance when they were trying to come out of her mouth.

“I think so, too.”

“Check your aircraft tomorrow and submit a report.” She stood up.

I hastily stood up. Then, I made a salute.

Kusanagi was returning to the desk. I walked to the door and got out of the room without looking back at her again.

I felt that the chill outside had become a bit milder. It was the silence in which everything was sleeping. But, it was not too late into the night yet. When I got back to the room, Tokino had gotten out of the bed and was smoking while sitting on a chair by the table. That was despite the fact that I climbed up the stairs as silently as possible so as not to make any noise.

“What were you asked?” I was asked by him.

“Nothing in particular.” I replied. “I heard my aircraft would be back tonight.”

“Was that all?”

“That’s all.”

“Hmm.” Tokino blew the smoke up toward the ceiling. “If so, why did Ms. Kusanagi come all the way to summon you?”

“I have no idea.”

“She could do that tomorrow.” He put the cigarette in his mouth and the tip burned red. “In addition ...” He exhaled the smoke sideways. “Why not me? If she needed a report, she should have asked me first, right?”

“Come to think of it, you’re right. Is it because I was the one who responded to her?”

“Yeah. I was sleeping.”

“Were you sleeping?”

“I got up, though.”

“Well, no big deal, anyway. She ordered me to check the aircraft and submit a report tomorrow.”

“Was she angry? Or, in a good mood?”

“I’m not sure. Neither was the case for her in particular.”

“Umm, was she?” Tokino tapped his cigarette against the top of an ashtray on the desk. “Well, we have various things in our lives.”

“What do you mean?” I sat on another chair by the desk. I was already wide-awake and could not fall asleep. My body was not tired.

“It is really cold tonight, isn’t it?” Tokino uttered. “Shall we drink?”

“No, I won’t.” I replied immediately.

“Or, how about driving around the area?”

“From now?” I exhaled. *Ah, since we have just flown, we are off-duty tonight. We can go out.* “But, my aircraft is scheduled to come back.”

“That’s not our job.”

“Well, no.”

“All you have to do is to check it tomorrow, right?”

“Yes.” I nodded. As he said, *I should sign my name on the mechanic’s document. That’s all.* I could do so without looking at the aircraft.

“We would be able to get back by tomorrow morning.”

“Where do you intend to go?”

“Well, you should know ...” Tokino grinned. “Same as usual.”

-4-

The light on the second floor of the office building had already been turned off, when we saw the window from the parking lot. It was Tokino who was driving our car. Since I made the emergency landing, it might be his way of commending my efforts that I pulled off in the moment of crisis. In the passenger seat, I was seeing the dark scenery absent-mindedly. We heard some music from the car radio, and

had almost no conversation.

“Driving a car is such a nuisance, isn’t it?” Tokino uttered so while facing forward. “What’s the problem with that?”

“Is it because it does not roll?” I replied.

“Roll? Wanna get inverted? I don’t think so. That’s not it. More fundamentally, this concept is wrong.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well. For example, think about roads. They are made for automobiles. In spite of that, cars do not run on the roads properly if we do not handle the steering wheels. What is the meaning of that?”

“Do you mean that roads should be designed like railway tracks?”

“Yeah, yeah. That’s right. If they stretch on the ground surface, then that has got to be the reasonable principle. At least, that’s the way roads have to be.”

“There are those who move along the designated routes, in the sky and on the ocean.”

“Oh, you mean the scheduled flights or liners. Yeah, I can tell that it would be such a nuisance as well.”

“I admit that it is destined to be boring.”

“Look. Do you know a game, in which you drive a light four-wheel-drive vehicle or something on a winding road?”

“Where is it?”

“Don’t you know? A driving game. You insert a coin and play it for a short time.”

“Oh, you are talking about the one with a miniature toy automobile attached to the tip of a stick.”

“Yeah, that’s it. Did you play that when you were a kid?”

“No, I was just looking at somebody else playing it.”

“Looking at it? Who was playing it?”

“My dad played it to show it to me.” I replied. “I was watching his playing the

game. I was still too young.”

“Oh, were you a preppie?”

“Well. Maybe I was.”

“Anyway, driving a car is not as hard as the game, is it?”

“You may be right.”

“Isn’t it funny that the game is harder?”

“Yes.”

“I wonder if there also is an aircraft game.”

“There was. The one in which you shoot a machine gun.”

“But, the game is designed so that you can’t pilot an aircraft.”

“Right.”

“Did your dad also play the game for you?”

“No. Umm, I have not played it for myself. I just watched someone playing it.”

“As for me, once I found it, I definitely played it. I was one of those who would not leave there until I got my hands on it.”

We had such a conversation.

It was completely dark outside and the world only existed within the space in front of the headlights. I felt as if we were flying in clouds. We climbed up the final slope, and reached the house, our destination. The building was vaguely illuminated. No sign board. No nameplate. Still, the visitors or outsiders could tell it was not a normal house from the surrounding atmosphere.

The entrance hall was viscously filled with smoke, music, and volatilized alcohol.

“Well, well, well.” A swarthy woman got closer to and snuggled against us. “It is unusual for you two to appear at this time of night.”

“Yeah. You appear to be having a plenty of free time.” Tokino commented.

“How dare you say such a thing. Fuko is there, by the way.” She swung her cigarette toward the corridor. “Ah, hey, I heard that an aircraft landed on a road. Are you telling me that you have attempted to come here?”

“Not me. He did.”

“Wow, really! Attention, ladies!”

We passed by the stairs, and walked the corridor to the deeper part. There was a bar. It was as dark as the interior of a cave. I would not be surprised if bats were hanging from the ceiling.

Fuko was sitting at the counter and facing us with her sleepy face.

“Argh!” She widened her eyes. “Ghosts?”

Two tables were both occupied with guests. Tokino sat on a seat by the counter and I took the seat at the end of the counter, on the far side of Fuko.

“Beer.” Tokino ordered, while lighting a cigarette.

“Mr. Kurita, you?” Fuko asked in a hoarse voice.

“What?” I was searching a pocket for cigarettes. I might have forgotten to bring them.

“One more beer.” Before I knew it, another woman was sitting next to Tokino, across him. She was making the order in a high-pitched tone.

“What is her name?” I asked Fuko.

“Err, who do you mean?”

“The girl on the farther side of Tokino.”

“Oh, who’s that?” Fuko laughed. “I see her often.”

“Is it a joke?”

“Does my voice sound bad? Someone said so to me earlier.”

“Not bad.”

“Thanks. I think so too. The ears of those who make such comments are bad, aren’t they?”

“It may be too noisy.”

“Say what?”

“The music is noisy.”

“Ah ...” While opening her mouth, she looked around. “Like a battlefield, right?”

“Battlefield? Ah, you mean, the one in a war.”

“Yeah, that’s right. They cannot have any conversation there, can they?”

“I’m not sure. You know, I just pilot an aircraft.”

“What about engines and guns? Do they not make quite a bit of noise? Bang-bang!”

“It is equivalent to being immersed in silence, for we do not have to converse with each other.”

“I know you don’t like having conversation.”

“Talking about me?”

“‘About mee?’ Meek?” Fuko sniffed.

I sipped the glass of soda Fuko had poured for me. When I had a drink here, I felt as if any kind of liquid was mixed with alcohol. Even in sweat, tears, and blood. So, I could sense the smell of alcohol even from sheets. I guessed they polished floors with alcohol.

Tokino emptied his glass quickly. He snuffed out a cigarette in the ashtray, and got out with the woman. He did not look back at me, probably because of his way of showing the courtesy for me. Unexpectedly though, he had such a polite side. I was yet to smoke at that point.

“Sorry, are you angry?” Fuko asked.

“At what?”

“Kusumi.”

“What?”

“The name of that woman.”

“Oh ...”

“The skirt is too short. Don’t you think so?”

I looked at Fuko’s skirt. I took my eyes away from it, and saw Fuko laughing.

“Do you have a cigarette I can smoke?” I asked.

“Cigarette, please.” She asked the man over the counter.

She received a box of cigarettes, and her fingers broke the package seal. Her nails were colored silver. She picked up a cigarette from the box and put it in her mouth. She struck a match and lit the cigarette. Then, she exhaled the smoke and a sigh simultaneously. Then, she held the cigarette with her fingers and put it into my mouth. This time the smoke was flowing through my throat. Only a little resistance of uneasiness remained in my throat. I felt that her lipstick was attached to it. It was a hot and spicy taste as if the outdoor noise was melted into it. It was not the brand of cigarette that I usually smoked.

“I see you smoking for the first time.” Fuko said. “May I smoke one?”

“Yeah.” *But you have already gotten one for yourself*, I thought.

“Shall we get ourselves moving?”

“Where to?”

“You know, to a room.”

“Not yet ... I am smoking and have yet to drink the soda.”

“You are interesting, Mr. Kurita.”

“Am I?”

“You might be sincere.”

“I do not think that I am insincere, either.”

“Your pronunciation sounds beautiful.”

“Pronunciation?”

“Yeah, sounds like that spoken by the one from a prestigious family.”

“Does it?”

“You are gentle, aren’t you?”

“Why do you think so?”

“Umm, I thought so last time we met each other. Rather, I always think so. When I ask you if you are getting angry, you show me your smile a bit for me.”

“I wonder if I smile like that.” It surprised me.

“You know, the other day, you fixed the carpet on the stairs back to the original condition, when we were climbing down. You know, it had been partially turned over.”

“I don’t remember that.”

“I think those who can do such a thing are limited in number. You are well-bred.”

“But the house that I used to live in did not have a carpet on the stairs.”

“Were butlers or old maidservants not in your house?”

“A baby-sitter came to the house.”

“There! I knew that.”

“What?”

“Ah, I really envy you. I wanna be rich, too. Rather, I wanna have been born to a rich family. But it’s too late, isn’t it? You know, we cannot be reborn, eh?”

“If you die, you might be able to.”

“Oh ... Do you really think so?”

“No.”

“Will we really be able to be reborn? Hey, what do you think about that?”

“That is that.” I shook my head. I was still holding the cigarette in my hand.

“That must be a lie. I mean, if we can really be reborn, then why am I scared of dying to this extent?”

“Are you so scared?”

“I am.”

“It has got to be the case, because you forget everything.”

“Forget everything? Oh ... Do you mean, everything about the previous life? Oh, I see your point.” She too was smoking. After inhaling the smoke, she was exhaling it slowly. “If so. I will not regret it if I forget everything. If anything, I want to restart it.”

“If you are living, can you not do that?” I asked.

“What?” Fuko widened her eyes. “If I live? While I stay alive? Restarting it? I don’t think I will be able to do that.”

“Why?”

“My voice is bad.” At the moment, she coughed. She put out the cigarette in an ashtray on the counter. “Ah, sorry. I know my throat is bad. It goes against me despairingly. So does everything. Not just my voice, well ...”

I did not think she was worrying about it that much seriously. Although her voice was unique, I believed that there was nothing wrong with it at all. In addition, voices would not be given off, if the one did not speak. It is not that voices are designed to give off the sound constantly while it is alive, and it is different from engines in that aspect. I thought about telling her so, but I decided not to do so, because she might interpret my statement as my telling her that it would be better for her to keep herself silent. *It was the right decision*, I thought as a result of the self-assessment.

“Hey, why don’t we go out?” Fuko suggested.

“Where to?”

“Wherever.”

“From now?”

“Yeah, now. What do you think?”

“I don’t think it will be bad.”

“I can drive my car, or Mr. Kurita’s will also be fine.”

“It is cold outside.”

“It will be warm in the car, right? I think it will be warmer than in a room on the second floor. Do you prefer being in a bed?”

“No, not in particular ...”

“I wanna see the ocean.”

“It will be just dark.”

“I doubt it. If the moon is in the sky, it will be bright, won’t it?”

“The moon has been there in the sky.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

I put out the cigarette, drank up the rest of the soda, and put on the coat once again. Fuko went upstairs and climbed down, wearing her overcoat.

“I might be enjoying this.” Jumping at me, she said. “My car is bigger.”

“I will drive it. You know, I’m sober.”

“Hey, that kind of demeanor makes you so sincere.”

Her words were persuasive enough to make me believe them. Fuko sometimes made good points. At times, though.

It was cold outside. With no cloud, the almost perfectly circular moon was floating at the high position in the sky. Surely, we could see the ocean under the clear sky. But, I wondered who wanted to see anything like the ocean. After having experienced the situation in which nothing but the ocean spread below me, I could not imagine that it would be fascinating.

After driving for about 30 minutes, we reached a road from which we could view the ocean. We drove for a while to look for a place to park the vehicle. Fuko was delighted. I could say she was in high spirits. I felt funny because she had to be far older than I was. However, it was not bad at all.

We found a place at which a guardrail was broken off, and parked the car. When I opened the window, the wind was severely cold. It was to the extent that I ended up laughing. So, I had decided not to get out of the vehicle. Fuko reclined her seat to gaze into the moon. Before long, she bent her knees and put her feet on the seat. I guessed that she could not view any part of the ocean with that posture.

I let the engine idle. The ratio of noise and music from the car radio was on a fifty-fifty basis. But I did not turn it off because that very noise sounded like waves. Only occasionally, cars passed us by on the road. I could not believe that all of them came here to see the ocean. Or the moon, for that matter. What were they doing so late at night. Probably, they were thinking about the same thing when they saw our car being parked here. *Ground is the place where we can stop anytime we want to. If we stop*

the engine, that'll be okay. That's the difference between the situation on the ground and that in the sky.

“Hey, Mr. Kurita, my dear.”

“Yes?”

“If I ask you to bring me to somewhere now, what will you do?”

“I will ask where to.”

“I don't mean that ... Why don't we escape together?”

“From what?”

“Umm ...”

“Do you wanna escape?”

“From many various things. My job, my family, the city, let's see ..., debt collectors, my friends, my parents, well..., all the things anyway. I will abandon everything, go to a new town with you alone, and restart from the scratch there.”

“What will you restart?” I asked. I wondered what it was. I could not really understand it. *Her life? But, can anyone restart his or her life?*

“Yeah ...” Fuko chuckled. “I wonder what it is. That's not good, eh? I have become too old ... I cannot become young. I cannot restart ...”

“So, what do you want to restart?”

“I wonder what it is. How can I know such a thing ...? Still, I know the current situation is not right in certain ways. If I do nothing, I think that things will take wrong directions and get worse and worse.” Fuko's voice was slightly trembling.

At the moment, I also have reclined the seat and was looking upward. So, I tried to turn my face sideways in order to take a look at her.

Fuko's face was there. Very close. A white face. The faint light from outside allowed the shapes and outlines of her cheeks to appear so serene and clear.

I held out my hand. Her hand brought mine to her cheek. It was wet. *Tears?*

“Are you crying?”

“Is that rare to you?” Fuko asked.

“Rare, indeed.” I answered honestly.

“For some reason, I want to cry.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know why.”

“Are there matters that make you feel sad?”

“Of course, there are.”

“Like what?”

“There are so many of such matters.”

“Are you recalling them?”

“No.” She twisted her neck only slightly. “I think I feel sad about the present. I cannot cry and shed tears for things in the past, no matter how sad they might have been.”

“But now, this is what you want to do. You have come here to view the ocean.”

“I’m glad about that.”

“If so, I’m glad to hear that.”

“However, happy moments cannot cancel sad things.” Fuko stated. “Why do you think it is the case?”

“I have no idea.”

“Rather, it makes me sadder.”

“Really?”

“Mr. Kurita, do you not experience anything that makes you feel sad?”

“Let’s see.” I thought about what Fuko was asking me. *If I am thinking about it, then it may mean that I do not have such a sad experience. If I have forgotten about them, then it may mean that I do not feel sad.*

“Oh, I wish I could fly.” Fuko sighed. “Can I get on your aircraft?”

“You can’t. That’s impossible. Is it your joke?”

“It’s my joke. Sorry.”

“You can fly on a large airplane.”

“I wanna get on it with Mr. Kurita alone.”

“I think that would be impossible. To begin with, my aircraft is designed for just one pilot.”

“Is that so? Can I not sneak into somewhere? Does it not have a trunk or anything?”

“No such thing.”

“Do you not bring anything there? Extra clothes to change, or a precious album.”

“I bring nothing with me.”

“Oh ... I see. If you crash, everything will disappear, right?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, sorry. I ... um, don’t mean to say anything like that ...”

“I don’t care about it in particular.”

“Oh, but, is there a place to load bombs or something? Can you put me inside that?”

“No, I don’t load bombs.”

“But your aircraft hangs something below it. I’ve seen it, actually.”

“It’s a drop tank. It contains fuel.”

“Can I not take a ride on it?”

“You cannot.”

“Really ...” She sighed again. “I can’t ...”

“You might be allowed to climb aboard a bomber.” I said. “Although you end up violating the regulation by doing so, at least it is not impossible for you to be on board the bomber, technically speaking.”

“Okay. I get it. That’s enough.”

“You should give up on it.”

“You are so cold-hearted, aren’t you?”

“Am I?”

“Yeah.”

“If I remember right, you earlier said I was gentle.”

“Cold-hearted and gentle.”

“I am not gentle.”

She sat up in the seat, and brought her face closer to mine. The lips made the contact, and she wrapped her arms behind my back.

Just for a moment, her pupils reflected the light from outside. She seemed not to be crying anymore. At least, she might have managed to find a hope close by.

“You are gentler than I am.” Fuko whispered.

-5-

As about one week had passed, it was on Sunday when I met Aoi Sagara.

A small event was held in a parking lot of the airbase. It was called Blah-blah-blah Festival. The Blah-blah-blah part was Tulip, Cherry, or something like that. The peculiar name of the flower out of the season was the name of a volunteer group. In short, the organization seemed to be holding the event. That was all I knew about that.

The event had been held occasionally for years. Of course, it did not start during the era of Kusanagi’s management reign over the base. She hated such gatherings so much she did not even bother making any appearances in them. I understood that this type of service was needed in order for us to get along with local residents. The base only lent them the space and a little electricity. About 10 stalls selling snacks were lined up. A flea market for goods such as old clothes, and a small amusement park area were temporarily established. Quite a lot of people appeared to be showing up.

Almost half of those who were related to the base were off-duty on the day. I too was off the duty by chance, and read magazines in my room until early afternoon. Tokino was out of the room. When I was briefly cleaning up my room and opening the window to bring in fresh air, I heard human voices from the direction of the

parking lot. They reminded me that it was that day.

The poster of the event had been on the wall in the dining room since about one month before that. Although I was not interested in it in particular, we had to move our parked automobiles to the farther sections of the parking lot. If I remember correctly, it was two days before that when Tokino asked me while driving if he should have parked at the farther part of the parking lot. I could respect such a person who was attentive to such matters. *So, I need not worry about our vehicles. I completely forget about it, though.*

The day when ashtrays on corridors were cleaned up, or the day on which the dining room would be closed. These matters were close to our everyday lives, but I could not remember them. When I was a small child, I even forgot about the school excursion to be held on the following day. In the morning, my mother accidentally saw the printed schedule and noticed it was the very day. I was scolded. But she hastily fixed a box lunch and I managed to make it to the excursion in time. After that, it had become my habit to wake up every morning to think about what day it was and to be relieved by realizing that it was not the day of school excursion. Had I never liked school excursions? Maybe, I never did. I just could not enjoy going to a trip with others. It was not that I could reach the destination that I desired to go to.

Since I did not dislike the studies at school, I could not find any value in the very notion of the disappearance of the studies no thanks to school excursions. I could make the same statement for the sport meets and school plays as well. I had wanted to tell that we children would have had better times if the teachers and adults, who were forcefully trying to let the kids have good times, just let us be free.

Perhaps, I could say such a thing just because I have gotten the current job. For lack of a better statement, it was a job that would allow me to fly around all over the places as I liked. I could also say it was a working place in which I did not have to cooperate with others intensely. Of course, there were rules. Still, I was the only one at the very center of the most important duty.

I guessed that I was in a good mood maybe because I had just finished cleaning up my room. My body was getting warmer, and I was somewhat hungry. It was at around 02:00 p.m. I was yet to have lunch. So, I had decided to see the Tulip or Cherry or Whatever Festival, because I thought I would be able to find some rare

and fancy foods.

When I put on a jumper and got out of the billet, I saw her in a courtyard.

A step for planting vegetation was installed around the building. On the concrete step, the woman was sitting. She was wearing a white coat, which was swollen as if she was ready to take a trip to a ski resort. She was the only one who was there. To begin with, civilians were not allowed to enter this area. She noticed my presence, and smiled while showing her white teeth.

“Why are you here?” I asked.

“Is this the billet Mr. Kurita resides in?” She asked me.

“Yes.” I nodded.

“Although I was stopped by a guard, he let me in after I said I had an appointment to see Mr. Kurita.” She shrugged. “Sorry. Honestly, I just wanted to see an aircraft. But the hangars were closed ...”

“If you are found by someone, you will be scolded.”

“Yes, you are right.”

“Let’s move over there.” I invited her toward the parking lot.

“Is this place not good? Will we be found by Ms. Kusanagi?”

“I think she is absent today.”

“Where is she?”

“I don’t know.”

“In the first place, where does she live? This airbase is not her living quarter, is it?”

“That is also what I don’t know.”

“Are you not interested in that?”

“No.”

She stood up. Then, she walked to follow me. We started heading for the parking lot, by going through the backside of the warehouse, not to the direction of the office building. I did so because she told me she had come from that direction. A

cordon that forbade trespassing was stretched across, and a guard was standing there. *I know him.* I bowed gently to him. As a result, her having told him that she came here to see me was proven. I ducked under the rope to walk toward the open space, but I was stopped by her.

“Wait.”

I looked at her, and let go of the rope.

I saw several white tents set up in the distance, and aluminum props supported by wires that were decorated with colorful flags. I could hear children’s cheers and music. People’s voices. Laughter. Someone was calling out to another. Barkers were calling in customers. I guessed that there would be a girl in a swollen skirt and a salesperson wearing striped pants. The handclapping sound. Whistles being blown. I could hear various sounds.

However, to be sure, I was sensing the atmosphere that I instinctively thought was not the subject that I wanted to get close to. I imagined that she was feeling the same way. She did not even try to see the direction. She turned her back toward me. We were standing in the cool shade of a tree, and she did not seem to want to be seen by anyone. She put on the hood of her coat, took out sunglasses, and wore them. It was the first time for me to see her wearing such stuff.

“Ms. Sagara.” I recalled her name.

“I’m glad to hear that. You are recalling my name, correct?” Her lips were assuming the shape of a smile.

“Why are you dressed like that?”

“It’s cold.”

I exhaled the breath through my nostrils. I would be glad if I looked and sounded like I was smiling to her.

“Well ... I was asked by Ms. Kusanagi not to see you.” I had decided to tell the truth honestly. In any case, it was always the simplest way.

“How come?”

“I don’t know why.”

“Really ...”

“Could you tell me why?” I found myself asking. But, I regretted it soon after I spoke so. “No, I don’t want to know the reason. I have brought you back here. You are not allowed to enter the premises of the base without a reason.”

“I told you the reason, didn’t I?”

“I did not make such a promise with you.”

“Well, I apologize about that.” She lowered her head as if she was nodding. I looked around. *Like I do from the cockpit.* I did not want to be seen by anyone, when I was with her. Especially, by Kusanagi. “However, I entered this base to meet you. No matter what, I need your cooperation.”

“Cooperation?”

“Yes, correct. I don’t have enough time.” After she looked behind as well, she took off her sunglasses. “I cannot go back to the house anymore. A certain organization is attempting to conceal specific information. They think that I know the information. So, I have been forced to run away. Perhaps, they might even come here at any moment.”

I was shocked. I was gazing at her and tried to judge whether she was acting, driven insane, or just exaggerating. Sagara’s eyes were staring straight at me, and did not move at all. At least, they were the eyes of the person who possessed the belief in herself. In similar ways, they also insisted she had something she wanted others to believe. To exchange the sentiments, her pupils were opened with no resistance, as if they were accepting the brightness of the outer world.

“What do you mean by organization?”

“Like the police, of the national scale.”

“Are you telling me that you have the information?”

“I cannot tell you anything about that. But my father and elder brother were arrested because of that, and they have never come back. They are missing.”

“Does it have anything to do with me?”

“Just a little bit.”

“How?”

“You are a Kildren.”

“So?” I asked back reflexively, but I might have been astonished by her words. Speaking of which, I recalled she wanted to talk about the subject.

“Is there a place where we can overlook the parking lot?” She put on the sunglasses again and asked me about another thing. Then, after looking at a building, she pointed at it. “How about there?”

“That one is also a billet, though.”

“Is it possible to get into it?”

“Who?”

“Mr. Kurita.”

“I can.”

“Bring me there.”

Due to the sunglasses, she looked as if she was an actor speaking her lines on stage. As I observed her, I got the impression that her cheeks were careworn. It might have been the impression because of the light.

I raised my hand toward the guard, who was watching us from the distance, and we made a return trip by going back the way we had used. We went through the courtyard, climbed up the stairs in the middle, and reached a passage connecting two billets. I could see parts of the bustle in the parking lot.

“Is this place okay?”

“No, not this side. The parking lot to the opposite side.”

We entered the building and walked on a dim corridor. A dead silence reigned. This billet was the newest within this airbase. There was a stairway close to the center of the building. We climbed it. We passed the third floor, the highest level, and got out to the rooftop.

In the bright light, she was running toward the railing. I first looked at the control tower in the opposite direction. Although it was far, this place could be observed well from the control tower. *Is anyone watching us?*

I walked toward her. As I look down over the railing, I noticed that the festival

tents were lined up below. But, what she was looking at was the parking lot in the distance. Many automobiles were parked there. There had got to be my car among them. Since Tokino was the one who parked the car, I did not know where it was. Usually, that many cars were not present in the parking lot.

“Mr. Kurita, do you have good eyesight?” She asked.

“Probably.”

“In the farthest row, approximately the fifth vehicle from this side. You see the white truck, right? Look, a little bit before the exit.”

“Oh, the truck you drove the other day.”

“Men in black are standing.”

“Yeah. There are two men.”

“Another one is in the shade of a tree before the parking lot, isn’t there?”

“Yes.”

“They must be waiting for me to get back to the truck. Probably, I will be taken to ...” At the moment, she looked at me and bent her knees, while turning her back toward the railing. “It’s over.” She sat down and covered her face with both hands. “I cannot go back. So, I think today is the last day I see Mr. Kurita.”

“If it is true, I think you would rather run away than spend time here to explain things to me.” I said honestly what I thought.

“I can go nowhere from here by foot. I will soon be found and caught by them.”

“Did you leave something important in the truck?”

“No, nothing.” She pointed her finger at her own head. “Important things are all stored in here.”

“What is the cooperation I can do for you?” I asked. “I’m just listening. I have yet to promise that I will do it for you.”

“Simple ... Oh, that’s not, of course. Ah ...” She combed her front hair backward with her hand. She stared at me once, and then looked downward. “Not good. I cannot get you be involved with this mess.”

“You mean you are giving up?”

“I’m not sure. I wonder if I can escape by foot.”

“Do you have a place to hide yourself in?”

“Umm, if I can get to the station ... Or, shall I take a bus? Anyway, I have to go somewhere farther away. Of course, I have a friend who can shelter me.”

“How about turning yourself in to the police?”

“Those men in black and the police are on the same side.”

“Hmm, I don’t see your point.” I was thinking. “You mean, the only way for me to do is to drive you somewhere? But, my vehicle is in that parking lot. I cannot locate it unless I look for it.” I brought my body close to the railing and looked at the parking lot. The entire parking lot was not necessarily visible completely, no thanks to the trees and the buildings surrounding the space. I could not find my vehicle.

“Will it be difficult for you to use an aircraft?”

I found myself laughing, because I recalled that Fuko said the same thing.

“I think using an aircraft will make us more conspicuous.”

“You’re right ...”

“Well, how about riding on a motorbike?”

“Motorbike? Where do you have it?”

“I have one in the area near the billet. We can go out from the west exit over there. Shall I send you to the station with it?”

“The nearest one is good enough for me. Then, after that, I will take care of myself.”

“Roger.” I nodded.

We went back into the building, and climbed down the stairs. I felt we were walking in the corridor somewhat faster than usual.

We got out of the building, and headed for a hangar. Since Tokino was probably out of the base with his motorbike, Sasakura’s motorcycle was the only one available for me to borrow. I was worried if Sasakura was there. If he was absent and the key was already inserted, could I borrow it without his permission? I had

borrowed the motorcycles from these two many times. If I could not use Sasakura's motorbike, then the next candidate was ... I was walking while contemplating such things.

Sasakura's motorbike was parked beside the hangar. The shutter was closed. As I kept her waiting outside, I got inside through an aluminum door. I found Sasakura standing on a scaffold at the rear part of a Sanka. He seemed to be taking care of the engine, which was exposed after the cowling was opened.

"Mr. Sasakura, may I borrow your motorcycle?" I asked him, while I got closer to him and looked up at him on the scaffold.

"You may. I left the key there." Sasakura with a monkey wrench turned toward me. "But why? Is your car out of order?"

"Something like that."

"Want me to fix it?"

"Yeah, next time."

I raised my hand, when I was about to leave.

"Where are you going?" The voice took me by surprise.

It was the voice of Suito Kusanagi. She seemed to be positioned beyond the Sanka. I lowered my head and looked at the direction. But, I saw no human figure. I felt that I heard it from the slightly higher direction, and looked upward. She stuck her face out of the cockpit. It was her Sanka.

"Ah, well, I am going out to have some coffee." I answered.

"That's a lie." Kusanagi chuckled. "You are in a flurry. Don't you have any idea of how long I have known you?"

"Oh, ma'am ..." *Calm down*, I called to myself within my mind. I had never been in a flurry like this even in an aerial combat. "You know, it's a personal matter."

"Hmm." Kusanagi put her both arms on the edge of the cockpit and her chin on them. "If you get on the motorbike with such light clothing, you will catch a cold."

"Well, I might do so." I nodded. "But, it is close by, just around the corner."

After raising her eyebrow, Kusanagi pulled back her head. She seemed to be

arranging the posture to sit straight. *What is she doing at such an hour?* She must have asked someone to stand by in the office for phone calls. I myself had been asked to do that sort of thing several times.

I looked at Sasakura's face once again. He had his lips curved. It was a complex face, which I could barely regard as a smile. I got out of the hangar.

It would not be good, if our conversation was heard. So, once I got outside, I asked Sagara, waiting for me, with gestures not to give off her voice. After I pushed the motorcycle and reached the place that could not be seen from the hangar, I told Sagara that Kusanagi was inside the hangar.

"Really." Sagara fixed her gaze toward me, as if she was glaring. However, I was out of her sight. Her face was indicating that she was being forced to make a difficult decision. "Do you think if I should greet her?"

"How come?"

"Because I might not be able to see her again."

I kept silent. It was the matter about which I should not say anything. However, I thought it would not be good if Kusanagi came to learn of the current situation. Kusanagi was a commander, belonging to the administrative post. She could not take an irresponsible action like I did. For example, Sagara might be a person who was wanted by the police. I was on pace to help her run away.

On the other hand, Kusanagi might have known Sagara better than I did. It would not be bad if I told Kusanagi about the current situation and asked her to make the decision about what I had to do. More than that, in reality, Sagara herself was at a loss whether to see Kusanagi. If Sagara were committing evil deeds and attempting to trick me, then her meeting Kusanagi would not even be the option. Her being at a loss was justifying her deeds. That was how I interpreted the situation.

"Well, I think I should not." Sagara whispered. "It will only make things even messier."

"It has already become messy, hasn't it?" I asked.

"No, I mean Ms. Kusanagi's mess." She said. "I don't want to get her into this."

“As for me?”

“Same sentiment is applied to you, of course.”

“Still, anyway, you should get on the motorbike.” I said, and started the engine.

Since it was Sasakura’s motorcycle, it started briskly from the get-go.

“It may be cold.” I looked back, and warned.

She sat astride the motorbike and nestled close to my back.

“Don’t worry. I’m wearing sunglasses.”

Sunglasses would protect only your eyes, I was about to say. But I looked toward the front, and started the motorcycle engine.

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Although we managed to escape from the airbase, it was severely cold outside. I had never felt such chill even in the sky. Come to think of it, it might have always been in summer each time I borrowed a motorbike and drove it. I recalled it was too cold even in summer, if I drove it while wearing a short-sleeved shirt. The woman clinging to me from behind was also feeling the freeze. Since I was not wearing gloves, the tactile sensation of my hands was gradually getting fainter. I felt that it was getting dangerous.

Still, we might have driven for about 30 minutes. By the time we crossed a bridge, I could not take it anymore and brought the motorbike into a parking lot of a café. It was the same place that I went to frequently.

I parked the motorcycle, and stopped the engine.

“What are you doing?” She asked immediately. “What is this place?”

“Let’s take a rest.” I said. My voice was probably trembling. “Didn’t you feel it was cold?”

“It was cold.” She nodded. “But, it was not that bad compared to that for you, because I was sitting behind you. Mr. Kurita, you surely felt it, didn’t you?”

“I am dressed too lightly. I should have at least put on gloves.”

We entered the café anyway. It was unbelievably warm. There was no other customer in the place. The master was reading newspaper in front of the counter. He saw us, moved to the inner part of the café, and returned to the space behind the counter.

“Hot coffee.” I made the order. I took a look at her.

“Same here.”

“The coffee here is always hot, eh?” The master said.

I requested the “hot” coffee because my body was craving for it. We sat at a table nearby, not at the counter.

“Look, my body has gotten numb.” I said. “I feel as if I’m taking a hot spring bath.”

“Hot spring?”

“I have never been there, by the way.”

“It is because of me. I’m sorry.” She took off the sunglasses. “You have done much more than I can ask for. I will manage my issue by myself, from now on.”

“By yourself? But, how?”

“I will wait for someone to appear. Then, I pay money and ask the person to bring me to a train station.”

“No one will come here. If someone comes, the chance is that the one is up to no good.”

“So ...” She looked toward the back of the café. *Is she considering whether she can ask the master?*

“The master cannot drive a car.” I told her. “One of his eyes is blind. The other eye has very bad sight.”

“I will call and ask someone to come here.”

“Call whom?”

“I will ask the master if he knows the proper person.”

Her eyes were staring fixedly at me. In her pupils, I could recognize the smaller,

reflected image of a frosted windowpane, lit by the red sunlight on the west side of the café. *This woman is beautiful*, I thought. Probably, I felt so for the first time.

“I’m okay. If my body gets warmed by drinking the coffee, then I can drive again. I think I can go to the station.”

“Sorry. I mean ... Thank you.”

“I prefer the latter.”

“Thank you so much.”

The master brought us the coffee. I held the cup as if I was wrapping it with both hands. So did she. Then, she smiled just once. I wondered if she was happy about the warmth that her hands were feeling. The master disappeared over the counter. Although he was hidden and could not be seen, there was a low, small sofa, and I knew he often slept there.

She was drinking the coffee. I checked the shape of her lips. It was the first time for me to recognize someone’s mouth moving in such a way while she was drinking something. I had never been interested in such an object of observation.

“I have to tell you the story.” She spoke, as if she was murmuring.

While sipping the coffee, I just kept silence. I did not think I had to listen to what she was going to speak. Even if it was important to her, it would probably not be a serious matter for me. Even if it was important to others and to all humankind, it would probably not be related to me all that much. There were so many issues like that. I guessed that it would be the case this time. I was just unenthusiastic in this way. I had been like that since a long time ago.

“In fact ..., I discovered the way, in which we can turn a Kildren into a normal human being.” She said. “For a long time, it has been considered to be irreversible. But, there is a way. Animal testing has been successful perfectly. It is proven to be safe.”

“Drugs?”

“Although it is no mere drug, you can think of it to be as something like that.”

“And?”

“You are unresponsive to this topic, aren’t you?”

“Yes.” I nodded. I expected that. “To begin with, we can never be free. I think almost all the Kildren do not want to go back to being normal humans.”

“Same for you, right?”

“Yes ... I have never thought of such a thing. Even if I do, then I would probably choose to remain the way that I am currently.”

“In these days, the drug that has caused the generation of Kildren is prohibited. So, Kildren would never be born in the future. It is because many people denied the life without aging. However, if they are told that they can get back to normal whenever they get sick and tired of being Kildren, what will happen? That will completely alter everything.”

“I do not quite clearly comprehend what you are speaking of, though.”

“In short, the technology I discovered will massively affect the society. I have just wanted to find and make sure of the possibility. Otherwise ..., I simply thought I might have been able to support you, the Kildren who want to revert to being ordinary humans. However, I noticed that it might create a great influence in a way completely different from what I have imagined. The information about my having discovered the way to bring the Kildren back to normal was leaked. So, because of that, things have been going this way.”

“Are you telling me that those who want the information are attempting to catch Ms. Sagara?”

“Yes.”

“If so, why don’t you change the whole setting, to make the new assumption that nothing really happened?”

“Change the setting, you say?”

“Yes.” I nodded. “You should officially announce that it was a mistake, although you thought you made the discovery.”

“No. That won’t do.” She shook her head.

“Do you crave for fame as a scientist?” I asked. Since it was so blunt and direct, I got a bit nervous after asking so.

“No, I don’t.” She showed a gentle smile. I witnessed for the first time on the day

a face that was showing enough mental space in her heart to express the fullness of affection. “I am not interested in fame. In reality, I discarded all the records, logs, materials, and references of my research. But this discovery can be traced back, once someone notices that the mechanism inside is so simple. In short, anyone can do it, once they manage to focus their attention on a certain point. They just have to take time, though.”

“Does it mean that someone else will be likely to notice it?”

“Yes. Probably, someday in the future.”

“If so, then can you not conclude that there is nothing that you can do?”

“Perhaps. That may be the case.” She sighed, raised her head, and closed her eyes. “However, there still is a chance. If it is not found by anyone, and if no one notices it ...”

“Is that why you are trying to run away?”

“If I am caught by them, they may force me to confess by injecting certain drugs into me. Before that happens, I have to die.”

“No kidding ...” I was surprised by her remark. “How can that happen?”

“That will probably happen.” An artificial smile was brought back to her face. “You know, if I am caught by them, that is. So, I have a gun to kill myself at any time.”

Sagara applied her hand on her chest.

“I think it is ridiculous if you die for such a reason.”

“You are right.” Sagara let just her lips assume the shape of a smile. “But, I am ready. That’s all right. As for you, when you get on an aircraft, you gird yourself for the battle, don’t you? Same is the case for scientists. When we try something new and tackle it, it is similar to flying an aircraft in the sky. It is far from the daily lives on the ground. And, we might not be able to come back again ...”

My impression of the woman in front of me was gradually changing. I started thinking that she was not the person whom I had known. I had thought that she was the type of woman who was feeding birds in a cage and was leading a simple life in the rural area. *Indeed, this woman was originally associated with Honjo.*

“Umm ... What relationship did you have with Honjo?” I just asked what came up in my mind.

“It might be the same as the relationship with the current you.” She answered. “I tried to get close to a Kildren, by making use of Mr. Honjo. It was what I used to be in the past.”

“I heard you two were married, though.”

“Kildren’s marriage is illegal. It is not allowed. Don’t you know that?”

“I don’t.”

“Really.” She nodded. “To begin with, Kildren’s marriage is very rare. I guess that it does not become the talk of people. We were not married. But, well, we had the relationship, close to that.” She spoke in a businesslike manner without changing her expression. “Doing so was the best choice back then. But, he died.”

“So, am I your next target?”

“No, that’s not true.” She shook her head. “My research had almost been completed by then. By chance, Suito Kusanagi and I are from the same part of the country. It was the biggest key in my research.”

“What do you mean?”

“I cannot explain it to you in detail. I mean, Kusanagi herself is the key. I disposed of all the references and data of my research. But the most conspicuous data is her. It’s the living Kusanagi. As long as she lives, they will learn of it, sooner or later.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I once thought of making use of you.” Sagara confessed in a subdued voice. “I also thought of asking you to kill Suito Kusanagi.”

“What?” I thought I recognized her words in the wrong way. Then, the sound I had just heard echoed several times in my mind. “Kill her?”

“Of course, we cannot do that.” She shook her head and closed her eyes. She bit her lips, breathed slowly, and opened her eyes. It was a gesture that indicated her controlling the emotion. “Still, we can take her out to somewhere, to places no one knows.”

“Why do you have to do that?” I asked.

“Because she is the actual, living proof.” Sagara said.

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I took Aoi Sagara to the station. I accompanied her when she bought the ticket and walked on the platform. But, for the final 50 meters, she walked alone by herself. I saw her off, while looking at her back. When she got into the train car, she took a glance at me. The train departed immediately after that, and I walked in the station for a while as I thrust both of my cold hands into the pockets. Since it was severely cold, I was looking for a warm place.

Why could I not walk with her for the last 50 meters? When she was getting on the train, I could have done something, such as kissing her, shaking her hands, and hugging her.

I will never see this woman again. I knew that. But, more than that, when I was listening to her at the café, I was probably feeling that she had already left for somewhere far away.

Since the waiting room looked warm, I went inside and sat on a vacant chair. I wanted to smoke, but I could not do so there. After thinking a bit for a while, I came up with the idea of making a phone call. There were three phone booths lined up at the farthest part of the waiting room. But, all the three booths were occupied at that point. As I waited for a while, a person got out of the center booth. So, I stood up and walked toward it.

I entered the booth, inserted a coin into the telephone, and first asked the operator to tell me the telephone number that I had to know. Just by telling her the address and the name of the place, I was soon given the information. I repeatedly uttered the number so as not to forget it. Then, I put down the telephone receiver once, and then pushed the number right after that.

“Yes.” A male voice answered immediately. *No one in this place announces the name.*

“Hello, I’m Kurita. May I speak to Fuko, if she is available?”

I waited for a while. I took another coin out of the pocket and inserted it into the phone.

“Hi, it’s me. Thank you for calling. I’m so glad.” It was Fuko’s voice. On the phone, her voice sounded relatively normal.

“Well, I went out to the station by motorbike. But it is so cold out that I’m not willing to return to the base. Do you have free time you can spend with me?”

“From now? Let’s see ...”

“Oh, if it would turn out to be difficult for you, that’s okay. In the case, I will buy a jacket.”

“Buy a jacket?”

“Yeah. Gloves as well.”

“Are you kidding me?” Fuko laughed.

“No, it is really that cold.”

“Are you okay?”

“For now.”

“Where are you now?”

I explained the location that I was in. I thought it was about 10 kilometers away from the place Fuko was. Much closer than I was to the airbase.

“Umm, well ... What shall I do?” She clucked her tongue.

“If you cannot go out, then you should not.”

“I will try to handle this situation. Just wait there, okay?”

After all that, Fuko appeared at where I was in 30 minutes. She was wearing an overcoat with white fur. All the people who happened to be around her looked back at her. Some of them even avoided her while walking. She jumped into the waiting room, hugged me, and kissed me three times. I was so embarrassed that I got out of the room immediately.

“Where are you going?” Fuko followed me, while running.

“Where is your car?”

“Over there.”

In a taxi stand in front of the station, her large sedan was parked. A taxi guide

greeted her with his open hand. She seemed to be known by them. We got into the car and moved to the rotary. She was the one driving the car.

“Let’s go to a restaurant. I will buy you dinner.”

“Oh? You are the one buying it, eh? Wow ...” Fuko laughed. “Well, well, you are really something.”

“I have money.”

“But, no necktie.”

“Hey, do you want to have a meal in such a posh restaurant?”

“No, no.” Fuko laughed again. “Have you come here by motorbike? From the base to here?”

“Yeah.”

“What are you going to do about the motorcycle?”

“I will pick it up, maybe tomorrow.”

“Why did you take the trouble to come here by motorbike?”

“Just for the heck of it.”

“How silly of you, in this severe chill.”

“It was cold.”

“I don’t get it. It is crazy for anyone to ride on a motorbike in such cold climate. I can still forgive you for doing almost anything else other than that, though.”

“Any place we would like to go. Do you have any place in your mind?”

“Hey, have you been considering it?”

“What?”

“Having me on an aircraft.”

“Oh, I think I said it was impossible.”

“How can you say so to me, who has come here while leaving a first-class customer behind?”

“You mean, a first-class passenger on board?” I needed about three seconds to

understand what she meant. “Oh, a first-class customer, you mean ...” Although I saw her point, I was at a loss of how to respond to it. “Will it not be good, if you get on an airplane in an amusement park?”

“Airplane in an amusement park? What is that?”

“Some stuff for children to get on, by inserting a coin.”

“Are you an idiot? How can the two of us ride on such a thing? A small kid can barely get on it.”

“Or, the thingies that go around a tower while being hung with chains, like a maypole.”

“Do you call that stuff airplane?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Have you ever tried it?”

“The one in an amusement park? I haven’t.”

“Come on. You are a pilot, aren’t you? You pilot a genuine fighter aircraft, right? It is the reason why you can come to my place, isn’t it?”

Why can I go to Fuko’s place, if I am a pilot? I did not understand well what she meant. I thought she wanted to express her pride, or something like that.

“Sorry, I don’t intend to make you angry. I will withdraw the proposal of an amusement park.”

“What you say and do like that shows your gentle side.” She instantly wore a smile again. “I like you so much.”

“Where will we have the meal?”

“I don’t care about eating. Ah, I crave for getting on an airplane. I wish I could fly.” As she said so, she let go the steering wheel and put her hands onto the ceiling. I found myself looking forward.

Our car stopped to wait for the traffic light to change.

She looked at me.

“I will definitely not forgive you.” Fuko pouted.

What can I not be forgiven for?"

But, for some reason, I ended up nodding anyway. *Am I telling a lie?* I thought.

Then, I was reminded of Sagara. *Probably, she is sitting on a seat by a window and looking outside.* I could no longer recall what identity she had immediately. The tale I heard from her was hazy like an old tale in the distant past.

More than that, I will have to be with Fuko tonight. It is the problem I am now facing. I said so to myself in my mind.

There are many miscellaneous and annoying things on the ground. The rule has not been changed since I was very young. That has been the case, since before I was born.

Episode 3: Flat Spin I walked far down the beach, soothed by the rhythm of the waves, the sun on my bare back and legs, the wind and mist from the spray on my hair. Into the waves and out like a sandpiper. And then home, drenched, drugged, reeling, full to the brim with my day alone; full like the moon before the night has taken a single nibble of it; full as a cup poured up to the lip. There is a quality to fullness that the Psalmist expressed: "My cup runneth over." Let no one come — I pray in sudden panic — I might spill myself away!

This excerpt is from *Gift from the Sea* by Anne Morrow Lindbergh

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After that, we had no conversation about Aoi Sagara. I sometimes recalled her, though. It was the image in which she was bringing her face close to the windowpane of the train. As if her time were stopped at the moment.

About half a month had passed. One day, when I was talking with Tokino and others in the dining room after lunch, I was summoned by Kusanagi and only I went up to her office. I had not flown for about half a month. It was unusual. Of course, the whole number of our sorties was decreasing. As for Tokino, he accomplished a scouting mission just once as a substitute for other team member. Because of the situation, I had not visited Fuko's place during the period. While climbing up the stairs, I was thinking about such peaceful matters. But, at the moment I saw Kusanagi, I was reminded of Sagara. *Perhaps, I might be called into her office about that. Actually, I am pretty much certain about that.*

I stopped at the door. Kusanagi turned to me and beckoned me to enter the room. That was when I noticed that another one was sitting in a sofa. It was a tall woman, whom I had met several times. She belonged to the information bureau. It was not that I had not heard her name. I just could not remember the name. I made a salute toward the woman as well.

"Close the door." Kusanagi walked forward from her desk. I closed the door. "Have a seat there. You know Ms. Kai, don't you?"

I nodded. *Right, that has got to be her name*, I recalled. She had straight short hair in a bob and was wearing a pair of glasses. Kusanagi took a seat next to Kai's. I sat on the sofa opposite them. An ashtray and a cigarette case were placed on the table. In addition, I saw a document case in front of Kai. The lid was slightly raised toward her.

"Do you understand why I am summoning you?" Kusanagi asked.

"No, ma'am."

"It's about Sagara." Uncharacteristic to her usual self, Kusanagi was not crossing her legs. I guessed that it was probably due to Kai's presence. "She seems to have vanished."

"Sorry? ... What do you mean by 'vanished'?"

"I heard that she no longer lives in that house."

"Has she moved to somewhere?" I asked.

"Don't you have any information pertaining to it?" Kusanagi was looking straight at me.

“No, nothing, ma’am.” *Kusanagi will perceive that I am telling a lie*, I thought. Still, I tried not to change my facial expression.

Silence continued for a while. Kai was also looking at me without words.

“Is it important, ma’am?” I asked the question.

“She has information that is crucial to our company.” Kai opened her mouth. A brisk and lively tone. “We want to know her whereabouts.”

“I do not know where she is, ma’am.”

“On Sunday at the end of last month. It was the day when that festival was held.” Kusanagi spoke. “Sagara’s truck was parked in a parking lot on the premises. She came here. A guard said one woman came to see Kurita.”

“I met her.” I answered, while entering the attack mode in my mind.

“I have not been informed of that.” Kusanagi interrupted me.

“I thought I did not need to report it, ma’am.”

“I ordered you not to see that woman.”

“In the first place, it was not your order. I made sure of that.” I reacted. “Secondly, I did not attend the festival to see her. She was visiting the base and I happened to see her when I got out of the billet. It was just a coincidence.”

“You met her, and what else?”

“We made small talk.”

“And then?”

“No, I do not know what she did after that.”

“Where did you part from her?” Kusanagi asked.

“Well, I mean, the place we met. Oh, we might have walked a bit.”

“Where did she go?”

“I do not know, ma’am.”

“What did she say about the reason she came here?” Kai asked.

“No, we did not talk about such a topic. I just thought she came here for

pleasure.”

Silence prevailed again.

“Umm, ma’am, may I ask you a question?” I asked. Kusanagi did not nod, but Kai did. “Exactly, who is, or what is this Sagara woman?”

“You need not know that.” Kai answered immediately.

“I apologize.” I nodded.

Kai picked up a cigarette and lit it. I saw the smoke being exhaled from her mouth.

Silence.

Kusanagi was staring at me. She did not take her eyes off me. It was like a beast belonging to the feline family targeting a prey. At first I felt I was being blamed for my telling a lie. *But, that’s not the case.* I finally noticed it. *Kusanagi’s eyes are ordering me to stick to my lie.*

On the day, I met Kusanagi in the hangar. She knew I borrowed Sasakura’s motorbike. *Why does she not ask me about it? The reason why she does not ask me where I went to is that she is trying to conceal the fact from Kai.* Kusanagi had already delved deeply into my mind to notice that I was lying. *Telling a lie is much more difficult for me than piloting an aircraft.*

“I heard you are the most trustworthy subordinate of Captain Kusanagi’s.” Kai said. Her statement surprised me a little. I had not been told so in the way and never thought of such a thing. “Do you have anything else to tell us?”

“No, ma’am. Nothing in particular. Well, I am very honored to be trusted.” Answering so, I looked at Kusanagi. She was still staring at me. *Very cold eyes.*

“Alright. That’s all.” Kai said.

“Thank you. You may leave.” Kusanagi said so without changing her expression. It was as if only her mouth was taking a ritualistic action.

I stood up and made a salute toward the two women. I opened the door and was about to get out, when Kai’s voice called out to me to stop.

I looked back. Kai stood up from the sofa and walked toward me. She slightly

leaned her head sideways and looked at me with her eyes squinted.

“Captain Kusanagi will go out this evening. So, I command you to accompany her as a guard.” Kai said quickly. “I advise you take a nap, if possible.”

“Roger.” I replied.

“Wait, ma’am.” Kusanagi objected. Although she was still sitting in the sofa, she stood up slowly. “There is no need for that.”

“I have just ordered him to do so.” Kai said to Kusanagi while looking at me.

“Ma’am, my immediate superior is Captain Kusanagi.” I responded.

“Fair enough.” Kai relaxed her lips and looked back. “You will drive there, won’t you? Bring Kurita there.”

“Ma’am, I think I will ask Kurita to take care of the base while I am away.”

“Such a task can be done by anyone else.”

“Same can be said about guarding me.”

“Do you want to argue with me?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Shall I say that again?”

“Are you commanding me?” Kusanagi asked with her eyes widened.

“I am.” Kai nodded.

“Understood.” Kusanagi had her gaze turn to me just once. “We are leaving at 17:00.”

“Roger.” I nodded.

Kusanagi walked to her desk and stopped there with the posture, in which she was looking at a runway. She kept her back turned toward me.

I moved my eyes from Kusanagi to Kai. She nodded slightly. I thought she meant I should have left by now.

“Ma’am, I’ll excuse myself.” I announced, and closed the door.

As I was climbing down the stairs, I saw Tokino standing in front of an ashtray in

the lobby. With a short cigarette in his mouth, he was smoking it while frowning.

“What’s wrong?” He asked.

“Nothing.” That was the only reply. I did not stop my pace, and got out of the building.

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I went back to my room, removed my clothes, and put myself in my bed. The dying blanket had forgotten its duty, and started absorbing my body heat. I had little experience in having trouble with falling asleep. At any time, once I wrapped myself in a blanket, I could fall asleep easily. Even though it was the dying blanket.

Still, I was thinking about where Kusanagi was planning to go. About the word “guard”, too. Kusanagi said she did not need that. *It should be a not-so-dangerous duty, but I cannot imagine the reason why I was commanded to be a part of that. Should I bring a gun? I should have asked Kusanagi about it.*

In the bed, I had a dream of my piloting an aircraft. It was unusual. When I was a child, I frequently had a dream of flying in the sky. But recently, I hadn’t had such experience. Rather, I recently had a dream of my rowing a boat or getting on a subway, occasionally. The boat was going down on a dirty river in a jungle. In the subway, the light sometimes went out and was turned on again. When I got on it, I wondered why it was not an aircraft. In addition, I had often had a dream of wiping glasses of a skyscraper building as my job. *Since I like high places, I am doing that job, I always thought so.*

In the dream, I was flying with Kusanagi. In the demonstration of her acrobatic maneuver, she rolled the aircraft like a screw exactly four times, stopped it, raised the nose of her aircraft, stalled, and entered the flat spin. *She’s awesome. That is indeed a boomerang.* When I asked Kusanagi why she could do such a move, she answered.

“You can do that, if you think no human is on board.”

Ah, I see, I was convinced. In my Sanka, there is one human getting on it. It was the reason why I could not do the moves like hers. It couldn’t be helped.

However, thanks to Kusanagi, I could fly for such a long period of time. When I

flew with Kusanagi, I did not have to worry about the situation around me. I could take time in focusing on the enemy aircraft in front of me. I did not need to think that I had to take care of the business quickly in order to support a consort plane. *I need not hurry, so I, a pilot that I am like this, have survived so far to date.*

On the other hand, how has Kusanagi been? Has she always been in a hurry for me? She might have worn out even more than when she flew alone. When two aircraft teamed up and fought against enemies, it was not unusual that the more skilled pilot got shot down.

“Don’t worry. Let’s try, Kurita.” Kusanagi smiled. “You can do it.”

She sometimes smiled in the sky, very joyfully. When I got close to her aircraft, she even waved to me at times. Showing her white teeth, she was laughing with real delight. In these days, I no longer could see such version of Suito Kusanagi.

When I saw her walking on the ground after getting back to the airbase, I could not believe that she was the same person as the one I saw in the sky. After the flight, her face was pale and she tottered. Her voice was hoarse and her eyes were vacant. It was to the level that I thought she might have left something in the sky each time she flew.

So, honestly, I was relieved to know that she was promoted to the commander. *If possible, Kusanagi should not fly anymore.* I felt she was wearing herself down and she would take a fall in the end.

She still flew every now and then. Even though she was the commander, she herself made sorties. Only when flying in the sky, she was the same as the person in the past. I could tell from the way she flew. She pretended to turn to the right, but instead rolled to the left immediately. From the stalling, she sharply controlled the nose of the aircraft to its side. *What direction is she looking at while flying? Perhaps, the most amazing aspect is her eyes to predict the enemy’s movements.* She could tell the way the opponent was intending to fly through. Moreover, she was perceiving the flight vectors while rolling and spinning. Her skill was far from declining.

Declining? Why has such a word come up in my mind? I asked myself in the dream.

Declining?

It is a phenomenon that cannot possibly be observed in a Kildren.

The word only has the same meaning for us as the expression of “getting sick and tired”.

Why do people keep changing?

Grasses, flowers, and trees will die someday. Some of them are withering immediately. Many of them will die each time after bearing fruit and producing seeds.

Why?

Why was such an inefficient program made? Why has God, which I do not believe in, incorporated the mechanism of lifespan into the genes?

As long as humans live, the cells are being renewed continuously. Same for plants and animals. Materially, the things that get older will undergo metabolic changes. Despite that, why will everything have to be returned to nothingness at a regular interval?

Why did God grudge the joy of living?

In order to know that, humans have to know the situation without the mechanism of the time limit. If not, we cannot make any comparison between them. We could not understand that, unless we experience the meaning in the status of immortality. No one can imagine that. I think that is right. So, is that the reason why we are conducting the experiments now?

But it is impossible for one person to compare two lives. If it is short, long, momentary, or eternal, every life is just once. Only this is the common rule among all the people.

“No.”

The voice made me look back.

Aoi Sagara was standing there. Although I thought I was piloting an aircraft, it was inside a building, in a corridor with white fluorescent lights being lined up. She was wearing a white lab coat.

“How are your sunglasses?” I asked.

“Here.” She put her fingers into a chest pocket of her white lab coat and pulled up the sunglasses slightly. “You know, the lights of an operation room are bright.”

“Operation?”

Then, I woke up. I felt I heard some noise. I thought Tokino had come back, but no one was in my room. I wondered if the window made the noise with the wind. I

looked at the clock, and it was a little past 16:00. I had about 15 minutes until the time for which I set the alarm clock. It seemed that I slept for about three hours.

Even after I woke up, my head tried to chase the dream. But it ran away quickly. Even if I was thinking about it, I soon could not even recall what I had been thinking about. Before the collapse of a sand castle, both the beach and the ocean vanished. I recalled a circular moon. *Is it the moon that I watched with Fuko? Otherwise, is it the moon I saw above the clouds one day in the past? Each of them is the same exact moon, though.*

As I was changing clothes, Tokino entered the room.

“Are you going out?” He asked.

“Yeah.” I replied. “On duty.”

“Really ...” He just uttered, and took off his jacket. *I guess he will take a shower.* He might have been done with the training.

I left the room. Since I still had some time, I decided to go and see the aircraft in a hangar. When I passed by the hanger where Sasakura worked, I saw the motorbike I had borrowed the other day. I heard people talking, and stopped there. The door was opened, and Kusanagi appeared from inside. I also saw Sasakura behind her.

“Oh, ma’am, are we leaving now?” I asked.

Kusanagi put her hand on her cuff and looked at her wristwatch.

“Yes. So, in 10 minutes, we’ll meet in front of the office building.”

“Roger.”

I resumed walking. I approached the hangar where my aircraft was moored, I heard mechanical noises. I opened the door and looked inside. A young mechanic was operating a grinder by the window. He did not see me. Probably, he could not hear the sound. Fine sparks were beautiful.

I walked around the aircraft. In the meantime, the sound of the grinder was going down.

“May I help you, sir?” The mechanic asked me.

“No, nothing in particular.” I answered.

I touched the cold leading edge of the wing with a hand, and looked below the wing. A stabilizer at the front part. I also checked the trim tabs of the elevators. Then, I walked toward the rear part and took a look at the engine. Only a small spot of black oil on the floor was glittering.

“Have you changed the oil?” I asked.

“I have.” The mechanic was approaching me. “New one, sir. I am not sure if it is true. But it is said that its fuel efficiency is improved by two percent.”

“Really.”

“When I saw it, I thought they were the same.”

“Have you checked the valve clearance?”

“Yes. Since it was a bit too wide, I fixed it.”

“Thank you.”

“Going out, sir?” He asked while looking at my clothes.

“Yeah.”

“Take care.”

I got out of the hangar, and walked toward the office building. The wind is blowing hard and it was severely cold. If we were not about to get inside an automobile, I would have worn a scarf.

It was still a bit early, and I waited for her while smoking in the lobby of the office building. Kusanagi was climbing down the stairway, as she was putting her arms through the sleeves of her black coat. She was wearing black suits. Her necktie was also black.

“Are we going to a funeral?” I asked.

“Yes.” She nodded slightly.

We walked to a parking lot and got into Kusanagi’s vehicle. She sat in the driver’s seat and I took the passenger’s seat next to her. After starting the engine, she fastened the seatbelt.

“Where are we heading for?” I asked. “If I have the right to know it, of course.”

“I will ask you to take over the wheel in the middle of a highway.” Kusanagi said. “You may sleep until then.”

“I have slept until now, so I’m okay, ma’am.”

“It may take no less than six hours.”

“Very far, isn’t it?”

“It would be easy, if we can fly there.” Kusanagi started driving. After all, I was not told about where we were going. Even if I heard the name of the place, that would surely be meaningless to me, though.

The sun had already set. The tires were making dull sounds on a dark road. The quick vibrations were continuing at regular intervals. Since Kusanagi did not turn on the radio, the silence prevailed in the car and it was an oppressive atmosphere. However, I was not disturbed by such a situation. Probably, Kusanagi felt the same way. I would be more tired when I tried to have an unnatural conversation. I thought it would be proper for me to hide the sign of life and just sit in the seat.

After driving through a small town, our vehicle entered a highway. Automobiles were running before and behind us. They honestly turned on their headlights and taillights. The streams of lights were flowing. I saw many large tank trucks and buses.

I was waiting for Kusanagi to start our conversation. I would definitely be asked about what happened on the day Aoi Sagara vanished. I was repeating the simulation in my mind.

“You went out of the base by borrowing Sasakura’s motorbike, correct?”

“Oh? Umm, yes, ma’am. A long time ago.”

“On the day, Sagara’s truck was parked in a parking lot. She was visiting the base.”

“Yes.”

“Kurita met her, didn’t he?”

“Yes.”

“Did you use the motorbike, because of the police in the parking lot?”

“Police?”

“You were asked by her. That’s all right. Probably, you sent her off at a station. There is no problem with that in particular.”

“So, what is the problem?”

“What did you hear from Sagara?”

I deeply contemplated in my mind.

Can I insist that I heard nothing? Without hearing her explanation, would I help the person who was being chased and let her go? If I could do such actions, I might be able to explain that it was probably due to the emotion called “love”, which is described in fictions. I mean, if such a thing could exist among us, that is.

Well, in the first place, how have I felt about Sagara?

Have I ever kissed her? I cannot recall it. I might have done so. I might have just imagined kissing her, or being kissed by her. I have no reason to decline it. It might have been that sort of thing.

Vaguely, I was reminded of Sagara’s face, figure, white hand, and white fingers. I started thinking she resembled my mother. Specifically, the outer corners of her eyes and her gesture to put her hand on her mouth.

For example, I did not embrace her like I did with Fuko. Even for that Fuko, I had never felt the emotion called love.

What is it? What is love?

When I see a puppy, I think I want to touch it. I feel it is cute. But can I call it love? How much do I love myself? I am not even sure of that. Does it just possess the meaning of preciousness? From my point of view, who is more precious, Sagara or Fuko? In the context, Kusanagi might be more important to me than the other two. If the three of them were about to be shot at the same time, then I would probably stand in front of Kusanagi to block the bullet without thinking anything. That is because it is my habit. Since a long time ago, I have been repeating the similar moves in the sky.

No, that is not love.

Although I can learn the thoughts of normal people by reading books, I know that I cannot see if such thoughts can really exist in the real world. Much of the emotion called love is no more than someone's desire to have a pleasant experience or to get immersed in an ideal situation. Even if they say they love someone, they just value themselves after all. I know some fictions, in which a character devotes the life to the beloved one. However, even if I do not love anyone, I can still sacrifice my life. All those who have died in battles have done so. Isn't it very common?

I think, they desperately repeat the word of love, over and over ... As if they try to make themselves believe that love is unbelievably rare and beautiful, that nothing is more important than love, and that love can save people in the end. It is a religion in which people worship the god named love, I thought. It must surely exist for people who believe in it. However, once they doubt it, they notice that it cannot actually exist anywhere and that it is just a fictitiousness that cannot occur as a phenomenon.

I was taught that lacking love meant being lonely and very painful. But, why are they afraid of the situation in which they are not loved by anyone to that extent? Even those who have never been filled with love are afraid of it. They just believe such things from the statements that they hear.

I often hear that a battle would not occur if there is love. It sounds so funny that I end up laughing at the notion. If so, why does anyone think of avenging the death of the late beloved one who has been killed? In the beginning, has the rationale for the human beings to fight been about gaining love? Have people fought because of love?

I really do not understand it.

In this era, fighting is detached from love. It has become about completely different motive. Still, what resembles love is a delusion that there is beauty in battles. They are completely the same. Nothing different. Those who caress their lovers while believing love are the same as those who fight while believing their victory.

How can we live without a war? The question is equivalent to how we can live without loving someone. That was how I was starting to think.

I looked at Kusanagi, who was holding the steering wheel beside me. Probably, I love Kusanagi, more than Sagara, and more than Fuko. It was not because both of us were pilots of fighter aircrafts, not because she was fighting, and not because I had known her for longer span of time than I knew others.

What is the reason?

I do not know the answer. It is almost like an intuition.

I have never touched even her hand. Even so, why am I now thinking such a thing? Does it imply that the meaning of love for me is not usual?

What is usual?

I have no idea. Ugh, I cannot understand anything. Am I thinking too much?

Our vehicle entered the parking lot of a drive-in facility, and was parked in front of the bright shop. Kusanagi sighed, and unbuckled the seatbelt.

“Shall I take over?” I asked.

“Yes, please.” Kusanagi nodded.

“Right now?”

“Let’s take a rest for about five minutes. Wanna eat something?”

“No.” I shook my head.

Kusanagi got out of the automobile. She walked around the hood of our car, and walked toward the shop. I too got outside and lit a cigarette. Due to the strong wind, I had to cover the lighter with both hands.

When I leaned back against the car and let the smoke flow in the cold air, Kusanagi got out of the shop. She handed a small can to me. It was warm.

“Oh, thank you, ma’am.”

She did not seem to have bought hers. I opened the can immediately and drank the content. I was not sure if it was coffee or tea. I did not even look at the label. Even if I confirmed what it was, it was not that the taste would change. Still, since I was thirsty, I admitted it served its purpose well.

“Move over.” Kusanagi stood in front of me and whispered.

“Oops, I forgot about that ... Pardon me, ma’am.” I walked away from the car.

I drank it up while walking and threw the empty can into a wastebasket. When I came back to the car, I looked at Kusanagi through the windshield. The red and yellow colors from the neon sign of the shop were reflected on the glass, so I could not see her face too well. But, she had already sat in the seat with her seatbelt fastened.

I opened the door on the driver's side and got inside the car.

"Ma'am, shall I drive down along the road?"

"Along the way."

"Roger."

I started driving. Kusanagi reclined the seat halfway. *Is she taking a nap?*

Our vehicle was cruising on the highway again. It was not the first time for me to drive her car. A light, powerful sports car.

"When I close my eyes, I feel as if I am getting on a bomber." Kusanagi said.

"Have you been on a bomber before?"

"I haven't."

We entered a tunnel. We were wrapped in orange light. I glanced at Kusanagi. She was not closing her eyes.

"That woman named Sagara ..." Kusanagi spoke, "She was not a conspicuous woman. Very earnest. She was a good scholar."

"She looked that way." I chimed in.

"Perhaps, she might come tonight or tomorrow."

"To where?"

"Funeral."

"Oh." I nodded. "Whose funeral?"

"You know, of the deceased."

"Who died?"

"My mother."

We went through the tunnel, and were on a straight bridge across a valley. I passed a large trailer truck in the middle. Then, I scrutinized the meaning of the sound that Kusanagi was pronouncing. But, I could not come up with a proper statement to respond to her.

"Really." With a little delay, I uttered.

“Well, you know, I have to attend it.”

“I think you are right, ma’am.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Umm, I’m not sure, though.”

“Why do you think Kai gave you such a command, to guard me?”

“I have no idea. Is it because driving alone would be dangerous?”

“That’s it.” Kusanagi apparently sighed. “Umm, but maybe, she was worried that I would fall into disarray and do something dangerous. She does not understand me at all. She never does.”

“Ma’am, do you expect any other types of danger?”

“No, not at all.”

“An easy guarding duty, eh?”

“Yeah ... If I start quarreling with someone, can you stop it?”

“Is there anyone who might confront you?”

“Well, the only one would be the man whom my mother was married with.”

“Is he not Ms. Kusanagi’s father?”

“No, he’s not.”

“You should not quarrel with him. I mean, at least in the funeral.”

“Let’s apply that strategy.” Kusanagi relaxed her lips. “After driving for about 200 kilometers, refuel at the station. Wake me up by then. Good night.”

She turned her body toward the window near her. I decided to raise the temperature setting of the heater by one level.

Without realizing it, I was driving on a downward slope, and gentle curves continued. I felt as if I were descending toward the runway. I was having the illusion that the tires would touch down on the surface at any moment.

Even after I refueled the car, Kusanagi did not wake up. I parked the vehicle in a parking lot of the rest area, left her in the car, and walked to a shop to buy cigarettes. I left the engine running. When I returned to the car, Kusanagi was sitting in the driver's seat. Maybe, she had been awake. I took the passenger's seat located next to her. The reclining angle of the seat had already been returned to the default, upright position.

"Let's hit the road." Kusanagi said.

"Ma'am, may I smoke in the car?" I asked.

Kusanagi extended her arm, and pulled out the ashtray.

We were back to the highway again.

"It exhausts us more than an aircraft does, doesn't it?" After the acceleration, Kusanagi uttered, while taking a glance at the rearview mirror. "We cannot let go of the control yoke even for a moment."

"You are correct, because it is landed all the time." I lit the cigarette. "Is it still far away?"

"A little more."

"Ma'am, may I ask you a question?" I asked.

"What?"

"Has she died of an illness?"

"Yes."

"Has she been ill for a long time?"

"Yes."

"I did not know that."

"You need not know anything about it, I think." Kusanagi commented with an expressionless face. "I also have a question to ask you."

"What is it, ma'am?"

"What did Sagara say she wants me to do? Disappear? Or, kill myself?"

"No, nothing ... About such topics."

“Can’t you be kind enough as to tell me the truth?” Kusanagi glanced at me.
“There has got to be no conflict of vested interest between Kurita and me. I think it’s clean. What is there for you to get by hiding it?”

“I’m not sure. Simply put, I guess it is the trust from one of you two.”

“Which one do you want to be trusted by?”

“Ms. Kusanagi.”

“You are worrying about how much I know about the issue. Isn’t that right?”

“Yes.”

“No matter how much I know it, there is nothing I can do about it.”

“But if you die ... I will be in trouble.”

“Why?”

“Because ...” I was looking toward the front.

I looked at the front windshield.

As I passed by a large truck, I saw its small side marker light.

Why?

Why will I be in trouble, if Kusanagi dies?

I’m not sure.

I do not understand it at all.

“I have no idea.” I answered.

“Both of us have lived for too long, eh?” Kusanagi burst into laughter. *It is unusual for her to laugh out loud. This would have been the usual version of her, if we were in the sky.* So, I was not shocked. “Every night, I think about at which step of which dance I wish I could die.”

“I don’t have any experience like that.”

“Because ...”

We just passed by a bus.

As she looked at it, Kusanagi glanced at me lastly.

I looked at her, who was facing forward again, and watched her chin.

I tried to correctly assess and catch the statement that would be given off next from her mouth.

However, silence.

Tire sounds.

Engine sound.

Whizzing in the wind.

Kusanagi breathed.

I waited.

She would be turning over at any moment.

While making a roll, she was turning toward the direction obliquely below.

How many times have I seen the beautiful vector?

How many times have I been excited by the shining wings that were ascending from the clouds?

I follow her.

I protect her.

I see her.

I wait for her.

No contact had been achieved.

Not even once.

“Because ...?” I asked.

It is because I am a Kildren.

I never age.

Because I am a child.

I know what is beautiful.

I know whom I love.

I understand it without touching it.

I understand it without bugging it.

I understand it without being loved.

A child knows the mother.

They are all the same as that.

“It is because you are a Kildren.”

So?

What?

Could it be?

I stubbed out the cigarette in the ashtray. I pushed its lid to close it.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I am not.” Kusanagi said.

She is not?

She is not what?

Not a Kildren?

Why isn't she?

“Why aren't you?”

“You heard it from Sagara, didn't you? I am the only evidence. If the general public learns that I am no longer a Kildren, then they are likely to panic.”

“Why?”

“Don't you notice anything? What about my face?”

“I don't notice anything.”

“Really. Have I always had a face like this?”

“Don't tell me ... I don't believe that.”

“Ah ...” Kusanagi sighed. “It is easy if I am on an aircraft.”

“What do you mean?”

“I can fly anywhere as I like.”

I looked to the front.

“Well, but if I am in a car, then it might be just as easy. If I drive straight to the opposite lane.”

“Ma’am? What are you talking about ...?”

“In order to prevent me from dying that way, she ordered Kurita to get on this car. That’s Kai’s strategy.”

“So, Ms. Kai knows it, doesn’t she?”

“You know, she belongs to the information bureau.”

“I am sorry.” I apologized to her.

“Huh? About what?” She looked at me.

“Sorry about hiding the information from you.”

“I’m not angry at all. I just want to confirm the fact. You know, I cannot change my circumstances.”

“I heard from Ms. Sagara that Ms. Kusanagi is the important evidence. But, I did not know that you have already been medically treated by her.”

“I have not been medically treated.”

“What? But ...”

“In short, I was accidentally reverted to the normal human being.” Kusanagi snorted. “Then, she found the reason. That’s all.”

“Can such a reversion possibly occur accidentally?”

“The probability is extremely low.” Kusanagi said. “Particularly for males, that rarely occurs. You know, if a random Kilden is given a different type of blood by accident, then the probability may go up.”

“A different type of blood?”

“I have become pregnant once. It seems to be the cause.”

“You’re kidding. I don’t believe that ...”

“There are other cases in which Kildren give birth to babies. All of their fathers were also Kildren. What this means is that I am the first one ever to represent the

different type of case.”

“When?” I asked.

I could not believe what she was talking about. Because I did not have a memory in which I was far from her during the period that would have enabled her to become pregnant. *Kusanagi is telling a lie*, I concluded.

“Let’s not talk about it. I am not willing to be reminded of it.”

You are lying.

But, if it is a lie, then it is too ridiculous.

If it is true ...

“So ..., what should we do ...?” While I asked so, I was thinking about what the question meant. All the words which came up in my mind were cruel situations. “I mean, what should we do from now ...?”

“Hmm.” Kusanagi showed a face that represented a good mood. I guessed she was probably forcing herself to do so for me. “I wonder what we should do ... Anyway, Sagara has been trying to hide this information, hasn’t she? She thinks it will bring about the confusion to the entire world.”

“She was speaking of such matter to me.”

“As for Kai, almost pretty much the same. She wants to keep it confidential within the company. She even asserted that the information has no use and is worthless in the society.”

“And you, Ms. Kusanagi?”

“What?”

“What do you think about that?”

“I feel nothing about that. But, you know, I may no longer be able to pilot an airplane. That’s all.” She showed me her vulnerable smile. “I cannot return to a Kildren again, not even once ... However, as I think more and more about it, don’t you think it is normal as a human? Everyone ages. No one can return to the past self. It is normal, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” I nodded.

“I don’t care ... about such a thing at all. Still, just ... I will not be able to get on an aircraft. I can no longer fight.” Kusanagi, looking toward the front, was still smiling. But, tears were falling from her eyes. “I cannot fly. I cannot fly anymore. Ugh ...” She was breathing as if she was trying to subdue her emotion.

I also was holding my breath, as I was looking at her, to the extent that it was painful.

“It can’t be helped, can it?” Kusanagi smiled. “I am a human.”

“I don’t get that.” I answered honestly. It might have sounded cruel. I noticed its cruelty after speaking the words. “I do not quite understand.”

“I think you have no idea.” Kusanagi nodded slightly. “Sorry. Let’s stop it.”

“Ma’am, can you keep driving?”

“I’m alright.” Kusanagi rubbed her eyes. “Don’t you wanna die?”

“No, for now.”

“Really? Why?”

“To guard you is my duty as of now.”

“Yes. That’s the vintage Kurita.” Kusanagi made a sigh.

She thrust her hand into a pocket of her jacket, and took out a pack of cigarettes. She shook the package, and put a partially protruded cigarette between her lips. She placed her hand into the pocket again, grabbed a lighter, and lit the cigarette. Exhalation of the smoke. She opened the window a bit. The running sound of the car got louder. She glanced at my face.

“Ah ...” She sighed with the smoke. “Sorry about that. I’m okay now. Phew ... Anyway, I will never cry at the funeral.”

“But, I think it is okay for you to cry for that occasion.”

“There is no way that I cry for her.” Kusanagi smiled a bit again. But, she soon went back to wearing the glum expression on her face. “Ridiculous. Why do I have to travel this far? For what purpose?”

“Ma’am, I think it cannot be helped. For one thing, it won’t happen more than once.”

“Right. I did not bother meeting her while she was alive.”

“I think you needed not force yourself to go there.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

We entered a tunnel. We were wrapped in the sound which was like the air was being rubbed. *Or, is it a reverberation caused by the repeated acoustic reflections? Mysterious sounds.* We got out of the tunnel once, followed by another tunnel. Even when we got out of the tunnel, it was in the darkness outside the tunnel. Rather, inside the tunnel was brighter.

Human lives are like this tunnel, I think. The time when we get into the tunnel is the moment of birth. The time we get out of the tunnel is the moment of death.

We cannot go anywhere else.

We just have to move toward the exit.

Even if it is long. Or, even if it is short.

What can I do? I thought.

I was sitting in the passenger’s seat next to the driver’s seat. *What can I do for Kusanagi? Talking with her? Listening to her story? No. Such things would be meaningless. They will not solve anything. To begin with, there is no solution.*

Humans can do nothing for others. No matter what kind words we give them, or even if we caress and hug them, nothing will be salvaged. We cannot be involved in other people’s lives. The only exception is to kill the human being.

Sagara’s words crossed my mind over and over again. *Kill Kusanagi.* I recalled the statement. *If we erase her existence, then most of the problems will likely to be solved, to be sure. Even Kusanagi’s own problems might be solved.*

However, if it is the true solution, then Kusanagi herself should have been dead since a long time ago. Why does she not commit suicide? Is it not her answer?

Probably, a ray of hope that she can fly again is keeping her alive. The tears Kusanagi shed was just for that. Although she says that she can no longer fly, she believes that she still has the hope. It is the reason why she sheds tears.

She is right about that, I thought as well. *There is no rule that only Kildren are allowed to*

pilot fighter aircrafts. Kildren just show the remarkable aptitude for aviation skills. In reality, I heard that a few of the ace pilots who were not Kildren actually existed in the past.

Yes, for example, the one called the Teacher.

The Teacher ...

He was the only one whom Kusanagi respected.

I knew so little about him.

They were all rumors or legends. They were not what Kusanagi spoke of.

He was a hero, who suddenly retired as a pilot and disappeared a long time ago.

What is he doing now?

Kusanagi stubbed out the cigarette and closed the window. The running sound of the car became smooth quickly.

“Ma’am, I wonder how the Teacher is doing now.” I asked. It was my way of attempting to change the topic.

While facing the front, Kusanagi widened her eyes.

We entered another tunnel.

Orange lights illuminated her face below her cheeks.

Her lips moved a little.

She turned her face to me once.

Did she look at me?

She is facing forward again.

Her throat moved, as if it was looking for proper words.

“How come?” Kusanagi asked.

“Umm ...” I could not respond immediately. “For some reason, I am reminded of him.”

“Really.” Kusanagi nodded.

“I think Ms. Kai knows it.”

“Maybe.” Kusanagi’s answer was dry.

We drove through a tunnel. We started going down a gently curving road. I saw countless lights in the distance. The collection of lights resembled a spaceship. It appeared that we were getting closer to the city.

-4-

At a corner of a residential area. It was not a church. It was a small building that looked like a simple assembly hall. I was waiting in the car. Although it was already in the dead of night, lots of automobiles were lined up in the parking lot and a few vehicles occasionally went in and out. Many of those getting out of the cars were elderly. They were not solitary. They were old couples, or elderly ones being supported by slightly younger companions.

About one hour had passed since Kusanagi got out of the car. Since I stopped the engine, it became quite cold inside the vehicle. *Still, it would be better because there is no wind here.*

I was thinking if I should check her situation. After all, I came to the place all the way as her bodyguard. On the other hand, she ordered me to wait in this car.

I sat in the seat deep and thrust both hands into the pockets of the jacket. Through the window, I saw the light over the hedges of the parking lot. It seemed that people were gathering toward the direction. Kusanagi told me that the official funeral service itself would be held tomorrow. *So, what is she doing now?* I had no idea. Also, I did not know the range of the type of people who were getting together.

I heard a small sound. It was as if someone touched the body of the car. I sat up in the seat, and looked backward. No sign of a person. I suspected that an object that was blown by the wind hit the car.

But, I was startled when I looked at the window beside me.

Only half of a small human face was there.

A child.

A short child was standing outside the door beside me. The kid was trying to peep into the car. I guessed that the child was there to attend the funeral. I had decided to ignore it.

The child was saying something in a high-pitched voice. I could do nothing but open the window downward.

“You must be Mr. Kurita, correct?” The child said.

“Yeah.” I answered. “Who? You are ...?”

“May I get in?”

“In what?”

“The car, obviously.” In spite of the young age, the child spoke in a steady and secure tone. “I will take the driver’s seat, okay?”

“Yeah.”

“So, hold this.” The child raised both arms and extended them into the car.

They were paper cups. I took two cups. I did not know what they were, but I could tell that they were hot drinks.

The child went around the front part of the car, and reached the opposite side.

The kid opened the door, and got inside head-first. Then, the one sat in the driver’s seat, grabbed the steering wheel, reached out the hand, and closed the door. After all the movements were finished, the child sat straight and looked toward the front in the posture for driving. Then, the kid turned the head sideways, looked at my face, and smiled happily.

“You need not worry. I won’t drive.”

“Okay.” I nodded. “That’s nice.”

“You may drink it. After all, I have brought it here for you.”

“Which one?” I asked, while slightly raising the cups in my hands.

“Whichever you like.” The kid answered. “I think one is coffee and the other is cocoa. Choose the one you like. I will take the other.”

“You prefer cocoa, don’t you?”

“Not really.”

“So, do you prefer coffee?”

“No. I don’t really like anything bitter.”

I checked the aroma of one of the cups. Since it was coffee, I held out the other cup toward the kid.

“Thank you. You are kind, Mr. Kurita.”

“By the way, who are you?”

“I am Mizuki Kusanagi.”

“Kusanagi?”

“Yeah. My elder sister asked me to bring hot drinks to you. That place is boring, and I prefer this place. So, let’s talk for a while.”

“Ms. Kusanagi’s ... younger sister?”

“Yes.”

“Wow ... I didn’t know that.”

“That’s obvious. We have just met for the first time.”

“I mean, I did not know that Captain Kusanagi had a younger sister.”

“Oh, really?” She turned her startled stare toward me, and sipped the cocoa. “Mr. Kurita, do you have siblings?”

“No, I’m an only child.”

“Really.” She sipped the cocoa again. Her eyes blinked like those of a doll.

“I am sorry that you lost your mother.” I chose the proper words to speak. I thought I had to say so as a courtesy to her.

“Actually, it has nothing to do with me. You know, she is not my mother.”

“Oh, she is not.” While responding so, I was thinking about what she meant.

“Umm, but, you are a younger sister of Ms. Suito Kusanagi’s, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I have the same father as my elder sister does.”

“Oh, I see.” I did not understand exactly what she meant. It was not the information I wanted to know, so I decided to block it.

“Mr. Kurita, are you the boyfriend of my elder sister?”

“No. I am, umm, her bodyguard.”

“What is a bodyguard?”

“Err, he is the one on a mission to provide the protection from danger.”

“Really ... But you don’t look so strong.”

“Well, I’m not strong.”

“My sister looks stronger.”

“Probably, she is.”

“You told a lie to me, didn’t you?”

“No, that’s not a lie. By the way, should you not return there? They might be worrying about you. Err, are you visiting this place with your mother ... or your father?”

“Neither. My mother and my father are no longer with me.”

“What? How come?”

“How come? Because they died.” She said, and sipped the cocoa. This time, her eyes were closed.

I doubted for a moment if she was telling the truth. But I did not have the courage to say, “You must be telling a lie.”

“Really. Umm, sorry about asking you an unpleasant question.”

“No, I do not feel that it is unpleasant.” She raised her eyes. “Because it is reality.”

“Reality. Ah, of course.” I managed to suppress the laughter that I came close to bursting into, because her way of making the statement was a bit funny.

“I am in school. The school is my home.”

“You have many friends, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Do you like your elder sister?”

“Umm, it’s a difficult question. If she likes me, then I think I can like her, too.”

“Probably, she likes you, I think.”

“How can you understand such a thing?”

“I just can. I have known Ms. Kusanagi for a long time.”

“Really? Even if I do not understand?”

“You would gradually understand that. Someday in the future.”

“Do you think even a child can understand that?”

“I think you can.”

“Can I stay here a little more?”

“Sure.”

She sipped the cocoa. I also drank the coffee.

A shadowy figure of a person passed by in front of the car. Because of the hood the one was wearing, I could not see the face. It was a woman. When she walked away a bit, I could see her boots. They were those I had seen before.

“Sorry. Just wait here.” I opened the door. I handed my cup to her.

“What’s going on?”

“My job.”

“Bodyguard?”

Without answering it, I closed the door and started running.

-5-

I jumped onto a short stone wall, and kept running on an sloped lawn. I saw many people getting out of the assembly hall from the main entrance. It was bright around the vicinity. But, the woman wearing the hood could not be located. *She has got to be nearby.*

While surveying the surrounding vicinity, I made the approach to the building. My hand was unbuttoning the holster inside the jacket. I rarely shot a gun. I had not even joined the drill as of late.

I found Kusanagi. She was holding the entrance door with her hand. She appeared to be greeting those who were coming out from the building. I walked

toward them. As if I was looking for an enemy aircraft, I looked to the right, left, and backward. I was trying to hear just the whispers of the people.

“Oh, it is cold outside.” Someone said.

“See you tomorrow, then.” I heard a few such voices, here and there.

As I climbed down the concrete stairway and stepped onto an asphalt surface, I heard a short and snappy sound that was similar to a tree branch being snapped, from the direction obliquely above and behind me. I looked back.

From an opening of the hedge, whose leaves had already fallen, the tip of a gun was sticking out by about five centimeters. It was pointed to the entrance of the assembly hall.

I took out the gun reflexively and pulled the trigger toward the sky.

Blast.

Followed by screams, with a delay.

Kusanagi lowered her head at the location.

The muzzle of the gun sticking out from the hedge disappeared.

I jumped on a stone wall and ran up the lawn.

I pushed my way through the hedge, and entered the premises.

Many branches were snapped in the process. I put my hands on the ground once.

In the darkness, I saw the object moving.

I ran toward the one.

Toward the parking lot.

Running.

The one stopped before the hedge.

The one was turning to me.

I stopped, too.

“Who? Kurita? Are you Kurita?” She asked.

“This is Kurita.”

“Don’t get too close to me! If you do, I will shoot you.”

“You were attempting to shoot Kusanagi, weren’t you?” I closed in on her.

“Please, do not come here!”

“It is my responsibility, because I let you run away.”

“I beg you! Please!”

I stepped forward.

A gunshot.

Light.

Then, I saw smoke.

Someone has bumped into me. I thought.

That was such an impact.

I saw the gun falling to the ground.

“Sorry.” Sagara’s feeble voice as well.

She was vanishing into the hedge.

Fading away.

The sound of the branches being snapped.

Footsteps from behind.

They were getting closer.

I was still standing.

“Kurita!” Kusanagi’s voice. “Where?”

Although I tried to look back, I knelt down onto the ground.

Once again, the ground seemed to be approaching me, and I crouched down there.

Have I just been shot?

Which part? Abdomen?

I tried to steady my breath.

Settle down, calm down.

The footsteps were approaching.

“Kurita.” Kusanagi raised me in her arms. “Have you been shot?”

“Sorry, ma’am.”

“Call an ambulance!” Kusanagi shouted loudly. “Hey, anybody out there!”

“Are you alright?” I heard another voice. “We have to call the police.”

“Ambulance, first!”

Many dull footsteps.

“Darn it!” Kusanagi made a big sigh. “Can you walk?”

“I’m not sure.”

“I will drive my car to bring you to a hospital. It’s faster that way.”

Kusanagi turned her back to me. I leaned against it. I barely managed to stand up. Rather, I felt that I was being lifted up.

“Hang in there!”

I was starting to feel sick a bit.

“Ma’am, take this ...” I held out my hand. I was still holding the gun.

Kusanagi took it. She seemed to put it into her pocket. She was carrying me. When we climbed down the stairway to the parking lot, she almost tumbled down once. Her car was parked very close.

I could no longer see the things around me. I noticed that the range of my vision was becoming very narrow. However, I was not having any sensation of pain or chill in any part of my body. *If so, how can I tell that I have been shot?* It made me wonder.

“Mizuki!” Kusanagi shouted while approaching the vehicle. “Open the door.”

I collapsed in the seat. I could not get my legs inside the car by myself. Kusanagi pushed them into the car one by one.

“Mizuki, return to where others are. You can go, can’t you?”

“Leave it to me.”

“Stay in this facility. I will come back later.”

“Alright.”

I could tell that Kusanagi was moving around the car to sit in the driver's seat. The body of the car shook, and she sat next to me. So as not to interrupt her in the process of shifting the gears, I pulled my hands back. I could move hands. The engine started.

“Oh, I should have reclined your seat.” Kusanagi said. “Are you okay? We're almost there.”

I nodded without words.

“Does it hurt?”

I shook my head.

-6-

I had a dream in which I was flying as Kusanagi's consort plane.

Elegant music was being played. *What is it? The rhythm is slow like that for a waltz.* But the aircraft was faster. It danced like a tree leaf.

It was filled with smoke and my visibility was poor.

I was desperately searching by looking around.

I brought my face close to the canopy and looked backward.

To survey the views in directions above and below me, I controlled the aircraft to roll into the knife-edge orientation to make the whole sky appear to revolve around me.

“Dead Eye. It is coming from below you!” Kusanagi's voice.

Immediately, I deflected the control surfaces to the opposite directions.

I saw its trajectory only for an instant.

The wings hummed and vibrated. The nose of the aircraft pointed downward.

Dive.

I choked the engine.

I employed the half-flap configuration.

Maintaining the nose orientation with the rudders.

Impossible.

The enemy aircraft passed by toward the left side.

I rolled to the opposite side. *I am betting on the next opportunity. That switchover is crucial.*

I pushed up the throttle, and flew around the target while climbing.

Roll.

Kusanagi was flying below me. I saw two more aircrafts.

I found someone above me.

Gigantic streaks of black smokes were driven into the ocean like spears. The closer any one of them was to me, to the greater extent it was whirling and drawing a spiral.

Checking the meters.

I banked the aircraft so that the target would be within the visual field above my head.

I gradually pulled the control stick to deflect the elevators.

To inside.

Holding my breath.

Left.

Roll.

I cut the throttle.

Flaps down.

High throttle.

Right.

Slightly to the right.

Down.

Planting my feet firmly to control the rudders.

Adjusting the direction toward the right.

Within the shooting range?

Calm down.

The target is escaping.

Go!

Roll over. At the same time, using the elevators.

Disengage.

Okay, I have finished it.

Half throttle.

I brought the flaps back to neutral.

I looked for Kusanagi's aircraft.

I saw a flame below. One enemy was going down.

Here comes another spear.

Another aircraft from the same space. It was climbing up toward me.

“Boomerang, are you still flying?”

“Stupid idiot! Move to the right!”

I rolled to the right.

Looking back.

A Sanka was lunging above me while flying with the corkscrew maneuver.

I made a turn to the direction.

The aircraft passing by Kusanagi exploded.

Her aircraft was engaged in a snap roll. She was watching everything by doing so.

Then, she ascended lightly while keeping the airframe inverted.

“There’s no more below us.” Kusanagi said. “How is it above us?”

“There are two, far above us.” While looking upward, I answered. “Oh, but, they are retreating.”

“Anyone else?”

“It seems that we are alone.”

“Darn it!”

Kusanagi was climbing up.

“Can we chase them?” She asked.

“No, we cannot do that anymore.”

“I will shoot down the two. Dead Eye, stand by here.”

“Pardon me?”

“I will come back again. So, wait here.”

“That’s impossible. It will run out of fuel.”

“If things go that way, how about flying home together on your aircraft?”

Kusanagi laughed.

“Oh, please. You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Have you checked the coordinates?”

“Yes.”

“Then, we are returning to the base.”

She was asking about those which had fallen. Since the battle was taking place above the ocean, there was little chance of their survival even if they managed to execute the emergency landing successfully.

Kusanagi had already stopped ascending and headed for the west.

While checking the safety locks for the weapons, I followed Kusanagi. Then, I took the position a bit above and behind her.

The canopy was shining with yellow.

I was feeling that the comfortable engine sound would last forever.

The edge of a cloud was torn off, and was dissolved into the blue sky.

I looked down, and the shadows of our two aircrafts were running on the clouds.

The air appeared to be so refreshing that I wanted to open the canopy.

What is Kusanagi thinking about?

Suddenly, that thought came to my mind. But, in the next moment, I was looking at my hand. The right hand that was holding the control stick. The thumbnail. I loosened the grip a bit, and sighed. *I must have been straining my whole body.*

I should not use the radio anymore.

Only when we were engaged in an aerial battle, I could hear Kusanagi's voice.

Even if the two of us flew together for a long time, we never touched each other.

Her hands.

Her cheeks.

I never touch them.

Approaching each other too closely is dangerous, and that is also the case for aircrafts.

Just merely touching each other's wings causes a serious trouble.

Even so, it is mysterious that we feel as if we were walking hand in hand. Always without saying words, we were taking a walk in the sky. Like jogging in a forest. Like strolling along a beach. Keeping our breaths in the same pace. Falling into step with each other. Running through.

It was the best pleasure for me to fly with her.

Occasionally, I recalled it.

When on the ground, I forgot about it.

I might be fighting for the moment.

Probably.

Yeah ... That's right.

This feeling has got to be love.

I exhaled the breath softly. The faint warmth welled up from the interior of my

body circulated through my throat, my nostrils, and then, after being exhaled, around my body. *Yes, I have known that all along.* I thought.

People indicated this emotion. This is love.

Then, I applied my left hand to the canopy to absorb the chill. I removed the palm to put it on my face to check my body temperature. *Oh, this is the temperature of a human, eh?* I thought. *Is everyone warm? Is Kusanagi warm also? Why are humans warm? Why can we not feel the warmth without making contact? There are things that we lose just by touching.*

The surrounding background became white. I guessed that we were entering the clouds.

“Dead Eye, are you still flying?”

“Boomerang, where are you?”

“Here. Are you okay?”

“Where? I cannot see you.”

I opened my eyes.

A white ceiling was there. Was it blinding because of the light?

Dream.

It was a dream.

I tried to get up, but something seemed to be holding down my body. I moved my head. Kusanagi was right beside me.

She was leaning against a wall.

Apparently sitting in a chair.

She was sleeping. While opening her mouth slightly, she was tilting her head.

“Ms. Kusanagi.” I uttered.

Her eyes opened. They were soon focused on me.

“Oh ... Waking up?” She asked. Her face was approaching mine.

“Ma’am, what time is it?”

“Well,” Kusanagi looked downward. She seemed to be checking her wristwatch.
“04:50.”

“Ah, in the morning. Before I knew it.”

“How do you feel?”

“Well, I had a sound sleep.”

“Yeah, it was not a serious wound. I heard you will soon be able to walk.”

“Pardon me. How is Ms. Sagara?”

“Oh.” Kusanagi put her hand on her forehead. “Sagara was caught by the police.
I was told so a little earlier.”

“Really.” I closed my eyes and exhaled a short breath.

“I will go to the police station later.”

“What about the funeral?”

“I will take care of it after coming back.”

“Shall I go to the police with you?”

“I don’t think you can do that yet.”

“That stinks.” I uttered.

“What does?”

“Not being able to accompany you, Ms. Kusanagi.”

“I will dismiss you from the mission.” Kusanagi relaxed her lips. “I have
contacted Kai. She said two will come here shortly.”

“For what purpose?”

“You know, guarding me and you.”

“But, Ms. Sagara has already been ...”

“In short, not so simple a problem.” Kusanagi frowned. “I would much rather
have been shot and died. If that happened, then everything would have been all
right beautifully.”

“Ma’am, is it a joke?”

“Yeah, of course. Why not?” Kusanagi stood up. “Would you like something to drink?”

“Well, is it okay if I drink something?”

“You will find the answer if you drink it.”

“So, I will try. I want to drink something cold.”

“Alright. I’ll be back.”

Kusanagi left the room.

I raised my head a bit, and looked at white curtains. There seemed to be windows beyond them. The room was small. There was no one else in it. Considering the fact that I was carried into a private room, my wound was not serious. She was right about that. *Is the anesthesia still working?* I imagined. I examined the status of my body with my right hand. It seemed that my abdomen was bandaged. I could also move the left hand. It was a bit numb. I lifted it up for a while and moved it. *I’m relieved, because my hands are not broken. I think I can pilot an aircraft again.*

A knock on the door.

“Yes?” I replied.

I turned my face to the direction, as if I was looking up.

“Wait here, please.” I heard a woman’s voice.

The person, who opened the door and entered the room, was Kai from the information bureau.

“Morning, Kurita.”

“Good morning, ma’am.”

Beside me, she took off her coat.

“I feel responsible for commanding you to accompany Kusanagi. However, I’m relieved that Kusanagi is safe.”

“Yes, indeed.”

“You have done well.” Kai sat on the bench, which Kusanagi had been sitting on. “Where is Kusanagi?”

“I think she’s gone to buy drinks for me. A moment ago.”

“The doctor says you can be discharged from the hospital tomorrow.”

“Will Captain Kusanagi also be back tomorrow?”

“She will return to the base today, after the funeral is finished. A subordinate will drive the vehicle back to her. Of course, we will escort you to the base, too. You can leave everything to us.”

“Thank you.”

“Have you heard anything from Kusanagi?”

“About what?”

“About Kildren.”

“I have, ma’am.”

Kai did not change her expression, leaned forward, and brought her face close to mine.

“Do not tell anybody. Understood?”

“Yes, ma’am. I understand.”

“Do not think about who of which type of people know what by how much.” She commanded in a subdued tone. “Forget everything. If someone notices that you know the information, then your own life will be in danger, okay?”

I nodded without words.

I wish I could erase my memory. I thought.

Not only the memory, but also such a fact.

Everything should disappear altogether. I thought.

After I heard some voices from outside, Kusanagi entered the room.

“Good morning, ma’am.” Kusanagi greeted. “Thank you for coming here.”

“I’m relieved that you’re safe.” Kai stood up. It was a gentle voice that I had never heard from her.

Kusanagi pulled the tab to open the can, and handed the juice to me. I received it

with my right hand. When I lifted up my head a little, she piled up cushions behind my upper body for me. I brought the can to my mouth, and took a sip. I could feel the liquid running down my throat. *Unbelievably delicious.*

“The men outside will accompany you two. One will follow Kusanagi. The other will stay here.”

“Understood. But I think nothing will happen anymore.” Kusanagi said. “Or, are you still on the watch for my committing suicide?”

“Actually, I am.” Kai smiled. “You cannot say you won’t, can you?”

“You are right.” Kai nodded slightly. “Honestly, I want to commit suicide while flying. But, if I say such a thing, will I not be allowed to fly?”

“It is not an elegant joke, especially in front of the injured.” Kai commented, while pushing up her glasses.

“My apologies.” Kusanagi raised her chin a bit.

-7-

Even after Kai left, Kusanagi was still in my sick room. She sat on the chair and closed her eyes. I was worried that she might be getting tired. But I too fell asleep before long.

I was woken up when the breakfast was served, and then Kusanagi left the sick room. She raised her hand and bid farewell to me just with her eyes. *Like the way we are in the sky.*

Anyway, I ate about half of the breakfast. I had an appetite, but the amount was too much for me.

Then, for some reason, I suddenly felt uneasy. But, I could do nothing about it. A doctor came to the sick room in the morning and asked me some questions. He did not check the wound. After that, a woman in white entered and replaced the used gauze on my wound with the new one. It stung just a bit. I kept my eyes shut, because I did not want to see the wound.

I did not eat lunch. I just wanted to sleep. *Probably, it is because of the effect of the drugs.*

I had a dream in which I was flying in the sky again. Surely enough, I was flying with Kusanagi.

When I woke up, I felt very good. I even thought that life in a hospital would be fine if things would be like this everyday. However, as time passed after waking up, I gradually got depressed. I mean, I felt that something like the weight of my body lying on the bed unbearably inconvenient. I even started disliking the very notion of standing up. *I would rather force myself to sleep by closing my eyes.* Even if I could not sleep, I preferred to keep myself still with my eyes closed. Because, by doing so, I could imagine the blue sky and the white clouds. *It is strange that it is brighter when I close my eyes.*

I ate half of the supper that evening. When I put the spoon on a tray and leaned back against cushions, the door was knocked and Kai entered.

“You will be discharged from this hospital tomorrow. Someone will send you to the nearby base via a car. After that, an airplane will take over.” She said in a businesslike manner, while standing beside me.

“Roger.” I replied. But it was the information I had already been given. I did not believe that the visitation was just for that.

“I have to tell you about minor changes.” She paused once. *She has come here to say this,* I thought. “You will be transferred. Where you will be transferred to is not yet determined. For the present, you will be sent to a medical treatment facility of our company. You will stand by and wait for further directions.”

“Ma’am, does it mean that I cannot return to that airbase?”

“Yes.”

“How about my belongings?”

“We will send them to you, of course.”

“Understood. Does Captain Kusanagi know this?”

“I will tell her about this later. She has no authority about personnel matters.”

“Can I make a comeback?”

“Comeback?”

“I mean, can I get on a fighter aircraft again?”

“You can, if your wound heals and you pass the examination.”

“I think I can pass it even now.”

“That’s all. Any question?” Kai lifted her glasses up with her fingers.

“No, ma’am.” I shook my head.

“Then, happy hunting in the future.” Kai held out her hand. I needed time to comprehend what her movement meant.

A handshaking that is more like merely touching each other.

I retracted my hand.

“Excuse me, ma’am. I have just one favor to ask you.”

“What is it?”

“May I call Captain Kusanagi?”

“I do not think it is a matter that requires my permission.”

“Thank you, ma’am, for your understanding.”

I made a salute while sitting in the bed.

Kai left the sick room. I heard her footsteps fading away.

Pieces of plastic tableware were lined up in front of me. I had no appetite, as if I were at the bottom of a swamp. I did not want to drink anything, either. If possible, I wanted to smoke. I imagined I would be able to do so when moving by car.

My belongings that I had left in the base were few. They could be stored in a single cardboard box. They were so unimportant, to the level that they might as well be trashed. *Do I not have at least one important object?* I thought for a while, but nothing came up in my mind. *For example, stuff I was given by a friend. Or, material goods I have long been holding onto since my childhood.* I could have had such things. But I did not have them. *Is it because I have no attachment to any stuff?*

Then, I recalled Tokino and Sasakura a little bit. *But, that’s all.* I did not have any sentiment of wanting to visit and to meet them. My mind had already initiated the processing, as if it was one image of the view from a train window.

I started feeling drowsy, and slept for another couple of hours.

The woman in white came to the sick room and replaced the used gauze with the new one. *Your recovery has been very good, sir.* She smiled like a woman in a poster. *I wanna call someone.* I told her. She nodded and asked if I could get up from the bed.

I sat straight up in the bed. I could tell that the blood in my head was drained out downward. It was the same feeling as I got when pulling the control stick to deflect the elevators. It was an everyday occurrence of us pilots.

The wound did not hurt me. I just felt that the part was heavy. While holding a bed frame, I put my feet on the floor and stood up.

“How do you feel?” She asked.

“The floor is cold.”

“Use the slippers.” She brought them to me.

I put my feet into the slippers, one by one.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“Can you walk?”

“Probably.”

I walked. At first, the woman was holding my hand. And, I did not need the further support. *Now I can go anywhere by myself,* I thought.

I found a bright place near my sick room and entered the counter. A telephone was there. She brought me a chair, which was by a window.

“Does it hurt?”

“Not at all.” I shook my head.

I sat in the chair, and made a phone call. I found a clock inside the counter. A little past 21:00. I was a bit worried if Kusanagi was not in her office.

I heard the ring twice.

“Yes, this is Kusanagi.”

“Ma’am, it’s Kurita.”

“Oh ...” The sound of air like a sigh. “How are you doing?”

“I just took a walk to make a phone call.”

“To where?”

“Err, just nearby. About 10 meters away from the room.”

“Will you be discharged tomorrow?”

“Yes. It seems that I will be brought to somewhere.”

“You might as well take advantage of this opportunity, and take enough rest.”

“I think so, too.”

I was thinking about what to talk about. I tried to recall why I was making a phone call. But, nothing came up in mind. Perhaps, it was something that was not represented by mere words.

“Ma’am ...”

“Yes?”

“I want to fly again.”

“I know you can.”

“I want to fly with you, Ms. Kusanagi.”

“I might not be able to fly.” Kusanagi said.

“I think you can.”

“Umm, but, I don’t want to think about it.”

“I hope ... You will do fine.”

“Fine?” Kusanagi exhaled the breath.

“Happy hunting.”

“Happy hunting.”

“Take care of yourself.”

“Okay. I will try.”

“See you again someday in the sky.”

“Yeah.”

“Please stay alive.”

“You, too.”

“Take care.”

“Yeah, I get that. You don’t have to say that over and over again.

“Please take care of yourself.”

Episode 4: Rolling Circle But I want first of all – in fact, as an end to these other desires – to be at peace with myself. I want a singleness of eye, a purity of intention, a central core to my life that will enable me to carry out these obligations and activities as well as I can. I want, in fact – to borrow from the language of the saints – to live in grace as much of the time as possible.

This excerpt is from *Gift from the Sea* by Anne Morrow Lindbergh -1-

The medical facility, or sanatorium, was a room for six people and the inpatients were mostly young ones. Among them, I and another one were the only those who could speak to each other. I was the only one who could walk. Naturally, both I and that other one hardly spoke and the silence always prevailed in the room. I heard only the sound of someone moving a part of his body.

I was discharged in about a week and assigned to an institution referred to as a laboratory. My duty was to test an apparatus that had been developed. Still, I was not a test pilot, who was allowed to get on an aircraft. With tapes and sensors attached to my body, I repeated tasks of watching moving images on a screen and operating switches.

My favorite time that I spent here was to run on a belt conveyor mounted on a machine. I exercised while getting my heartbeats and breathing measured. At first, I used the machine to measure the health readings. Later, I got permission to use it for a training purpose. It was because I was not allowed to get out of the building.

My private room was also in the same building and I could see only a courtyard through the window. But, when I opened the window, I could always hear the sound of multiple automobiles. *I guess there are roads with heavy traffic. This place might be in the middle of a town.* I did not know where I was, because I was brought here by car, from which I could not see outside. *I might be looking like a prisoner,* I thought.

There seemed to be several persons like me. However, I had never had an opportunity to talk with any one of them.

Most parts of my private hours were used for reading slightly old magazines. At times, a cardboard box filled with many magazines was delivered to my room. I took them out one by one and put them on the floor while checking the contents and dividing them roughly into three groups: interesting ones, not-so interesting ones, and the ones I would not likely read. After being done with it, I packed the cardboard box with magazines I had already read. There was always no magazine I wanted to keep in my room. Many of the magazines had already been published half a year or so in advance.

The cardboard box was delivered every two or three weeks. At the fourth time, I found the photograph of Suito Kusanagi in a women's magazine. Without it, I would have put it into the group of magazines that I would never read. The size of the article occupied about one-fourth of the page. The photograph was even smaller and was in black and white. It was her profile, and she was not showing the smile, as usual. She was wearing a military service cap. Judging from the short hair, I thought it was the photograph taken a long time ago. It was an article about a ceremony to celebrate the anniversary of the foundation of our headquarters. It described an acrobatic flight Kusanagi executed during the event. I remembered it because back then I flew with her to the city, in which our headquarters was located. I could even imagine the pictures of her flight pattern in my mind. But her flight itself was not minutely described in the article. It only mentioned that Captain Kusanagi did not appear at the party. Which meant that the photograph was taken in another occasion.

I decided to clip out the article. I had never done such a thing. I was doing it for the first time. I removed a razor blade from a shaver, and cut out about one-fourth of the page with it clearly.

I thought of where I should store the paper which I had just clipped out. *Should I sandwich it between the pages of a book?* But I did not have a book. My only belongings were clothing. Moreover, I might be moved to another location sometime in the near future, just like I had experienced.

Oh, I have a license card. I was putting the card into the thin card case, and wore it around my neck, along with my identification tag. It occurred to me that this card case was suitable

for putting the cutout. I could carry it at any time. I folded the article while being careful not to make a crease on the photograph, and put it inside the card case.

The premonition that I would never see Suito Kusanagi again had become the reality. I had not had even an opportunity to talk with her by phone. I was always under surveillance here and could not take a day off. I could not get out of the building. When I asked them how long I had to stay here, the answer they provided was “a little more while”. Still, it was not so shocking to me, because I was not forced to do undesirable duties. If anything, it was too easy. It was so leisurely that I started worrying about the decline of my physical ability. It might be the most relaxing time that I had ever experienced in my life.

It was irritating for me not to pilot an aircraft, of course. At the same time, I gradually came to understand how much the situation with no danger of my life could make me relax.

Anyway, I had been very calm in those days. I hardly thought about unpleasant things. I had a dream less often than before. I had a sound sleep during the night. The comfortableness was what I felt when I was wrapped in a blanket. I felt that the photograph in a calendar on a wall in the laboratory was funny. It was the picture in which children were running toward me, and their expressions were very heartwarming. Each time I looked at it, even I could smile as I liked. *How mysterious it is. Maybe, I was like them when in my childhood*, I thought. I grew up while being loved, adored, and indulged by my parents. Since I had almost no friend at school, I could hardly wait to go back home. My mother came to get me. Seeing my mother's smile was my pleasure. I thought I went to school just because my mother was glad if I did so.

When I told my mother that I would become an aircraft pilot, she totally objected to the idea. It was the only occasion in which I went against my mother. However, it appeared to be attractive for me to that extent. Actually, it was far better than I had imagined. The best job for me. I was truly glad to have found the way of living.

But, I guessed that ordinary people would spend such boring but safe lives every day. I had come to the realization. When I piloted an aircraft, I was afraid of being in such a tranquil life. It was surely peaceful. I needed not look around. I did not have to search for the enemy.

Probably, I have recently been persuading myself in this way. *This is a human. This is humanity.*

“It can’t be helped. Because I am a human.”

Kusanagi also would not be able to fly forever. Considering what she had become, it would be inevitable. *But, no worry, I believe the safe life would be gently waiting for her. Only if she accepts it, only if her mind becomes calm, everything would work well and would be all right. She would become able to understand that it would be the simpler way. Yes, I believe so.*

However ...

I had just one concern. The problem was whether the current I was the real me. Just a little part of me kept warning myself. A very small yellow lamp was blinking to inform me of something abnormal. No buzzer. The warning light blinked quietly at slow intervals.

Abnormal. I am abnormal.

This is wrong. I have to change something.

I had something like a premonition which was warning me.

And then ...

I could not help but think that the feeling was coming from the card case in front of my chest. To begin with, wasn’t what made me clip out the article the same warning circuitry?

Does it intend to keep warning me forever?

The light flickered in the tranquility like heartbeats. It was the only thing that was moving. It was very small and was twinkling in yellow.

While thinking about it, I would start to feel sleepy. The next day would come before I knew it. I was reminded of it, pulled out the card case, and checked Kusanagi’s photo was in it a few times. *When was it? When did I clip out the article? Where did I put the razor blade that I used for the task?*

I was running on the belt platform. I was looking at the digital numbers which continued to change. My sweat was running down. The walking pace was the rhythm of my breathing. But my heart was beating at a different pace. *Why is my body*

so heavy? Why can I not go back to the sky? When did I make the mistake?

If I were a migratory bird, can I fly forever? Can I fly as long as my strength continues? If it cannot fly, it can do nothing but fall to the ocean. It was the real way of my living. Recently, I would fall into a warm blanket. A comfortable sleep.

Each time I woke up in the morning, I thought I could not fly that day as well.

Every day, I thought there was no sky anymore.

But I am still alive.

I am breathing.

At such a place, at a place where I cannot see the sky.

I notice that a human can still live a life.

If this is the state of living.

I might already be dead, correct?

Neither funniness nor sadness existed.

When I touch something, I feel it is cold or warm.

But, is it the meaning of living?

Why does the blood running in my body keep me alive?

For what purpose do my lungs repeat breathing?

Although a new box of magazine was delivered, I eventually ceased to open it. Anything new was not in it. Rather, I did not want a new thing anymore. Just within me, my blood was circulating. It wouldn't get out of my body. Human beings are closed. Thoughts also raced through. I put the things that were served into my mouth and digested them. As instructed, I just opened my eyes and then closed them. I opened my mouth and closed it. *Anyway, I have to prevent it from breaking apart. I have to make sure not to stop.*

But.

I looked at the colors of the windowpanes that were getting gradually darkened.

I leaned against a cold wall.

I happened to remember something.

Those colors of the windowpanes were the light coming from far above.

There are clouds and more clouds above them.

On top of them, beautiful blue stretches without limit.

Only the sun was floating there.

I was moving straight in the space.

Swimming.

Flying.

Light vibrations.

The hand that was gently making a grip.

Through the goggles and the canopy.

Light was shining into my eyes.

By leaning my body a bit to the right, the world was naturally turning toward the opposite direction.

Above was now below. The right was replaced with the left.

The whizzing sound.

Like a flute.

The white stream appeared from nowhere and was trailing.

Even birds do not ascend to this altitude.

Spacious.

Beautiful.

The clear layer of the air made us float.

Resounding, screaming, groaning.

Shivering, rubbing, shredding.

Revolutions happen below.

Ceremonies are also held below.

Any events occur far below.

Below, down, and bottom.

They could not ascend to this level.

I know.

I know this place.

I'm proud of being able to come up here.

I respect everything that is here.

I love everything that exists here.

Again, someday, in the future.

I swear I will be back here.

Grazing, cutting, holding, releasing.

Returning, restoring, looking up, ducking under.

Thrusting, pulling, swinging, biting.

Shooting, twisting, gouging, dropping.

Dance.

Scatter.

Crush.

I know.

Our lives are at this place.

My life.

Your life.

Everything is here.

I have found it here.

Even the lives of those who have gone down.

They are still here.

Forever and ever ...

Sweetly, lightly, continuing lives.

Red, hot blood, gushing out.

Swelling flames.

Stuck fragments.

Explosive sounds that were following me from behind.

I do know.

Here.

I know this place.

Therefore.

Probably, I can live only in this space.

Sky.

Sky.

I get to know it, just in this place.

Then, the shine was cut off quietly and the glass in front of me was getting blacker gradually. The night covered the exterior and hid everything from me.

The door was knocked.

The dinner is almost ready, I guessed. I stood up, and walked to the door.

A uniformed man was standing there.

“Jinro Kurita.” He called my name.

I moved to the corridor and faced the man. I made a salute. It had been a long time since I saluted the last time.

“Here’s your assignment.” He said, while holding out an envelope. “We are moving. Get prepared within 30 minutes.”

“Sir, to where?”

“You will know, as you get there.”

“Roger.”

I sat in the rear seat in a minivan. Another man, who was young and had been in the same facility, was next to me. He also seemed to have been notified of the appointment. In the passenger seat was the man who had just told me of the assignment notification. The one at the wheel was a young woman.

“It takes about seven hours by car.” The man at the passenger seat looked back and told us so. “We drive halfway by this car. We will take a bus in the middle of the way at the relay point. You two may sleep until then.”

“Sir, are we not allowed to ask you what duty it will be?” I asked.

“There will be an explanatory meeting in the tomorrow morning. It is not the kind of thing that you need to worry about.”

“I do not worry about it, sir.”

“We have hastily decided to conduct a large operation. Urgent personnel compensatioin.”

In my head, I analyzed the words of “operation” and “personnel compensation”. They sounded nostalgic. But I had yet to be able to think clearly as if clouds were covering my brain.

Inside the vehicle was colder than in the building. Each of the metallic parts was cold. I tried to cool my body by touching them. I thought I could think more clearly if my body was cooled down.

The car got on a roadway and started running on the street. I saw a huge factory-like building over the road. I looked back, and found out that the building in which we had been had a similar structure. Because there were few windows, it looked like a warehouse. The road with three lanes in each direction stretched straight. Many of the vehicles were large trailers and tanker trucks. *That is the place where I have been*, I thought.

“By the way, I’m Koshiyama from the information bureau.” The man at the passenger seat looked back. “How are your conditions?”

“No problem, sir.” I replied immediately.

“You?” He looked at the man next to me.

“I think I’m okay, sir.” The man answered. His eyes were sleepy.

As I saw absently the lights that appeared to be moving from front to rear outside the window, I eventually fell asleep. When I woke up once, guardrails of an expressway appeared to be stretching endlessly. I thought I had already gotten on a bus, but I was wrong. I looked sideways silently. The man next to me was also sleeping, while burying his chin into the collar.

I noticed that the car decelerated, and then woke up. The bright orange light was shining high in the sky. It was like a passenger airplane that was about to land. It was a lighting tower of a drive-in facility.

I stepped out of the car and got onto a large bus. I sat on the rearmost seat. About 15 people were in the bus already. *Are they all pilots? I'm not sure about that.* The bus started moving immediately after the two of us took our seats. The man who had brought us here did not get on the bus. I looked at him raising his hand to see us off through the rear window of the bus.

No one spoke anything. *They had got to be pilots*, I thought. There was no pilot who would enjoy talking in such a situation. I could no longer tell which seat the other man who had come here with me took in the bus.

The bus swerved to the right and left at slow intervals, and then moved to the expressway. The acceleration was slow. *For how long have I not ridden on this type of bus?* I thought. I remembered I got on a bus like this when I went on a school excursion. The bus made rattling sounds as if it were in a bad mood. It gave me unpleasant feelings, but buses were not designed to go down unlike aircrafts would do. They could be parked anywhere. *Being on a road provides such conveniences*, I thought. It was funny that I had such a thought. I had not had such feelings around that time. *What is it?* As if the drug efficacy was wearing off, my thought started getting clearer. *Drug?* Do not tell me that it was the effect of some sort.

Although I was used to monotonous vibration, cars were bumpier than aircrafts. In addition, I could not sleep if I thought about what would happen from that point of time. I was aware of myself getting unusually excited. We went over a mountain. By the time the light in the sky was growing, we were on a road in flat farm fields. I closed my eyes and took a sleep just for a short while.

The vibration sounds of the tail assembly woke me up. But it was the vibration of the bus. It was stopped in a parking lot and the day had completely broken.

The door in the front part of the bus was opened. One man got inside and ordered us to get off.

There were ones with big luggage. There seemed to be two women, even though I had not noticed them up until that point. No one said anything. We got out of the bus quietly. Since I sat at the rearmost seat, I was the last one to exit the bus.

The ground was graveled. Other than the bus, just four big trucks were parked. I saw a large structure with a dome a bit far away from us. There was a four-story building beyond the structure. And, at almost exactly the center of the vicinity that included those structures, there was the place that was elevated. Obviously, it was the control tower.

I looked around. From the direction of the shining sun, one aircraft was approaching at a low altitude. It seemed to be landing. Everyone looked at the direction. We heard the engine sounds a bit after that.

“Nice sound.” Someone uttered.

-3-

We had warm soup and bread in a spacious dining room. They were delicious. There seemed to be many pilots here, aside from us, who had just newly arrived at the place. I thought the number of those just in the dining room would probably be more than 50.

The briefing session started at 10:00. At first, as the plenary meeting for all, they explained issues to us in a huge room. About 100 people were gathered there.

We are making a sortie in about 30 hours. In other words, in the afternoon of tomorrow. You will be organized into teams and each of you will hold a respective meeting. If you need to have your aircraft tuned up, you will have to conduct flight maneuver training within four hours in the afternoon today. Each pilot may fly for 10 minutes. At 10:00 a.m. tomorrow, 24 hours later from now, the final meeting will be held. The final decisions will be announced then. There will be about 30 percent of chance that we will not conduct the operation. So the explanation went. Team formations were shown on the screen of the slide projector, and we moved to the next room according to what was displayed on it.

About 15 people were in the room. I did not know any of them. We did not introduce ourselves to each other.

When the flight formation was projected on the screen, our code names were called and we raised our hands one by one. I was assigned to the second row from the front. I jotted down the names of the leader and just three of other members. We were given the detailed explanation about the equipped weapons. We were then scheduled to meet again in the early evening. We were directed to check our aircrafts and their armaments. After we were dismissed, the leader called to me.

“Kurita, go to A5 hangar. Sanka Mark 7B is moored there.”

“Sir, whose aircraft is it?”

“It is not brand new, but still relatively new. Pilot it in the time slot from 14:20 to 14:40.”

“Roger.”

“You may check the armaments after that. Is the condition okay?”

“If possible, I would like to have the aircraft loaded with weapons before the test flight. The heavier, the better.”

“Alright, then do it that way.”

I promptly ran out of the building and headed for the hangar. It was spacious and six Sankas were moored inside. My aircraft was the closest to me. I found a mechanic and started the discussion. He was young and wearing a red jacket on overalls. I told him I would conduct a test flight in three and a half hours.

“Sir, you can fly right now. Only if you give me some time to fill it up.”

“I want you to equip it with weapons.” I opened the reference filed document, and showed him the corresponding page in question.

The mechanic brought his head close to it and ran through it. He was apparently nearsighted.

“Alright, sir. I think I can do it.”

“If you don’t have enough time, you need not equip it with all the weapons, of course.” I said. “I just want to check the general feel to the balance of the weight.”

“Sir, have you ever piloted Mark 7?”

“I have piloted it all the time. But I haven’t done so in the most recent three

months.”

“You got injured, right?”

“Yes.”

“The engine of this one is superb, sir.”

“So, I leave it to you. I will come back here in one hour.”

I went to a billet to put my belongings there. As much as it was in a billet, so to speak, our room was small, and two bunk beds in it were arranged in two rows. Another man was reading the reference material on his bed. I pushed my luggage under the bed next to his. Then, I washed my hair and brushed my teeth in the shower room. After moving to the dining room, I read the reference material while drinking hot coffee.

In the timetable, the parts indicating the time and the location were left blank. I guessed the information to be filled into the blanks would be announced the next day. Still, I could grasp the general flow. We would take off from this airbase and join another units in the middle. Before that, two waves of scouting missions were planned. Four patterns of mission schedules were prepared, and which one of them would be employed depended on the outcome of the scouting. One team was to escort bombers and its course was a bit different from others’. Also, the course of one team was designed to stray off in the middle. I guessed it was for a feint maneuver.

I belonged to the leading team, which would reach the front soonest. The operation was so large-scaled to the extent that we would join it only once a year or two. Since they needed many pilots for such an operation, we were summoned in haste.

Is Kusanagi’s team joining this project? I thought. Even if we may not necessarily do so simultaneously, I’m sure they will also fly. If not, why would they bother to summon a dulled dolt like me? I have not flown for three months.

After reading the reference material twice, I poured the remaining cold coffee into my throat and went back to the hangar.

The mechanic was ducking under the main wing. The hatch was open. Cartridges of machine gun was piled up on an electric dolly nearby. Because a lift was attached

to the dolly, he seemed to be able to load them by himself. All other Sankas were being maintained by respectively assigned mechanics. From one Sanka, its cowling was removed. It was obvious that all of them were scheduled to fly next day.

“Is anything wrong?” I asked while crouching down near the leading edge of the main wing.

“Nothing, sir.” The young mechanic answered. “I will finish it in about one hour.”

“I might ask you to adjust some of the parts after the flight.”

“Of course, that is understood, sir.”

“Do you think you will have enough time?”

“I have to take care of another aircraft, but that will be okay, sir. You know, I still have the whole day.”

“I want to get on it. Is that okay?”

“Sure, go ahead.”

I climbed up onto the main wing and got myself into the cockpit.

I sat on the seat, and then adjusted its positioning.

I grabbed the control stick, and then looked to the right and left to check the position.

Placing my feet on the rudder pedals. I gently stepped on them to check the feeling.

I put my left hand on the throttle lever and applied my finger on the lock button.

Taking a deep breath.

I sat back in the seat and fastened the belt.

Closing my eyes.

I felt as if my body were sinking.

It was as if I myself was melting into the fuselage.

I was being assimilated into the Sanka.

I wanna fly ASAP, I craved.

Let me fly immediately, I wished.

A blue sky always appeared on the backside of my eyelids.

I knew that the image was etched on them.

I opened my eyes, and took a deep breath again.

Calm down. This is my job.

Without realizing it, I had come to admire it like a dream.

That's not what I have to do.

Like a mail carrier stuffing letters into mailboxes.

I would steer toward proper directions to bring the enemy aircraft within the firing range.

This is my job.

Like a chef shaking seasonings above a frying pan.

My thumb would flick the trigger quickly.

Like washing dishes, I would roll sideways, and break away.

That's right.

Calm down.

I opened the reference file, and decided to reread it from the scratch.

Judging from the experience I had had in the past, it would probably take place above the ocean. There was no other place where such many fighter aircrafts could gather. I could roughly imagine the position where we would first join the colleagues. If Kusanagi's team would ascend, would that be the coordinate? No, there might be another development that was not listed in the reference. We might belong to the group responsible for the second phase of the attack. We were allocated to a relatively late time slot.

I wonder if Kusanagi will fly.

I guess she will. So will Tokino and others. What formation will they fly in? Was extra personnel recruited after I left the team?

About 15 minutes had passed, and the sounds from below the aircraft faded. I got out of the cockpit and there was no mechanic within the sight. The dolly was also gone. Probably, he was going somewhere to take the next equipment. I decided to smoke in front of the hangar.

The sky was covered with clouds that were hanging low. The blowing wind was chilly and gave me the impression that it was about to snow.

The mechanic appeared from the back of the hangar. The storage room seemed to be located at the basement of the rear part. After raising my hand toward him, I decided to take a walk for a while. I made up my mind to take a look at the runway. In addition, I could warm myself by walking. Honestly, I even felt I wanted to run a little bit.

When I reached a place from which I could look over the runway, I saw several persons running in the distance across the runway. It was not exactly a group of runners. Each of them was running independently. The sight was an indication that there were those who were sharing the same thoughts with each other. I could say that persons with similar characteristics were engaged in this job.

What we have to do before our flights are to have our aircrafts maintained and to control our own minds. Although I have tried various things in the past, I have come down to the conclusion that anything will do in the end. Running, reading book, or listening to music. Whatever I do, time advances even if it is slow. If I do not see the second hand of a clock, the time will come without fail.

Then, whatever worries I have, they will vanish into thin air once I take off from the ground, as if they had been lies.

It will not work while the tires were scrubbing the ground. The anxiety will not disappear until I can feel that only the control stick in my right hand is supporting everything, and that my right hand is holding everything of my freedom.

Once I grab the freedom, I am no longer afraid of anything.

I gain the altitude steadily, and will get up above the clouds shortly.

Everything becomes more beautiful.

Even humiliations, glories.

Defeats, victories.

Then, life and death.

Everything is beautiful.

My right hand will provide everything.

Everything is for us.

I am reminded of the fact.

Therefore.

I will wait for the time peacefully and quietly.

Waiting is, in short, equivalent to living on the ground.

Although I intended to walk, I found myself jogging lightly before I knew it. Occasionally, I passed by other pilots. No one looked at me in the eyes. One was wearing a hood, another was wearing a pair of sunglasses. However, no one was looking downward. Everyone wanted to leave the ground. Probably, it was the only thing that we were wishing for. *Flying to the sky, immediately.*

Fighter aircrafts were taking off from the runway. As I saw them while running, five aircrafts left the ground. Due to the poor visibility, they disappeared soon after they climbed upward. I heard just their engine sounds. I guessed they were conducting the test flight for certain adjustments. I checked my wristwatch. I still had two hours to go until my turn.

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The test flight ended in an instant. Everything went well. Once I grabbed the control stick, my body and mind worked automatically. I adjusted the trim tab alignment, and talked through the radio with the mechanic on the ground. He also recorded the data from the instruments of the aircraft. All I had to do was to become a part of the machine and to move smoothly. Anyway, the effulgence above the clouds was truly nostalgic. *Yeah, this is it. This is the very place where I have long dreamed of,* I thought.

The weight of the weapons and the balance of the airframe were problem-free. After all the tests concluded, I rolled clockwise (to the right) five times, stopped the roll, and then rolled counterclockwise (to the left) five times. The axis of the roll

was coincidental with the part around my chest. *Very nice.* The allowance in the steering was little. I noticed the indication that the aircraft was still fairly young. If so, I would soon get used to it. The engine was impeccable. My guess was that it was just starting to get broken-in properly. I was sure that this aircraft had yet to fly for long hours. The recent general trend appears to be that there are enough aircrafts but the pilots are scarce.

My body got warmed up in a hurry and my mind was soon filled with confidence immediately.

Wonderful.

Sanka, and this sky.

The fact that I am living, and my very being.

Fine.

Everything is fine already.

After being called by the control tower, I descended while turning.

The runway appeared to be sunken at the bottom of the murky air below the clouds.

My Sanka was also sinking into it.

The aircraft got on the landing course, and touched down while being blown by the crosswind and ending up with the oblique orientation as if it was experiencing the sideslip. As I let the aircraft taxi toward the hangar, the young mechanic welcomed me with his smile. I opened the canopy and flashed the thumb-up sign to him. It occurred to me to ask that man's name. *But, I may not stay here after tomorrow's flight. What will happen on the day after tomorrow? Come to think of it, I have yet to be told anything about it. Will I return to that laboratory?*

As I got off the aircraft and walked on the ground, I started feeling depressed. I imagined that the ground tended to seek for our worries to make us gloomy. In other words, it might be a type of the gravitational effect. The entire environment was designed so that we would not just fly away. Our bodies and minds would not fly, if they were rendered heavy and anchored to the terrestrial surface. After all, we would be safe if we could not fly.

During the meeting held in the early evening, I could talk a bit with those belonging to the same team. After that, we also shared the dinner table.

Of course, we did not converse about personal matters. Many of our geeky topics were about the characteristics and specifications of Sanka. Even if they were the same model and the same version, the individual attributes of each aircraft differed from those of others. The most strikingly different aspect lied in the engines. Beside them, some of the parts may differ from others, according to their configurations. The trim tab alignment varied from one pilot to another. Also, even when we executed the same maneuver, the order and the amount with which they adjusted the control surfaces might differ depending on the pilot. The information we pilots were exchanging was such a subtle thing. *If you do this, you may have a slight advantage when such cases actually occur. However, contrarily speaking, you can also suffer from disadvantages in another cases. Everything has both merits and demerits. There is no such thing as the best method.* It was the reason why the settings and configurations are unique to each pilot.

Some drank alcohol. I did not. We were dismissed and dispersed by 19:30. The leader ordered us to gather again after the general meeting to be held next morning.

After returning to my room, I lay on the bed. I thought I should have brought a magazine. But, if I did it, I would not have been able to read it. When I opened my eyes, I saw the under side of the upper deck of our bunk bed. When I closed my eyes, I could recognize that many streaks of patterns described curves against the background of the blue sky above the clouds. I could trace them as if I myself was absorbed into them. Countless possible patterns of the enemy's potential maneuvers appeared constantly, and my right hand reacted while trembling each time. My eyeballs would sway rapidly, and my face would resonate slightly.

I thought of whether to take a shower or not. Since my body was already warmed in the blanket, I decided to fall asleep. But I woke up once to brush my teeth.

Just by imagining what would take place the next day, my body started shivering. *I can't wait.*

Then, I was so happy in the blanket on the bed.

I did not even have a dream that night.

In the following morning, I woke up naturally, and attended the general meeting

as the first step. For the reference material, I filled in the blanks with the numbers. Yet, I would not get a chance to read them while flying. To begin with, I would not get lost, because many aircrafts were going to fly together anyway. If I have to return to the base in the middle of the operation because of unexpected malfunctioning, then it will be a different story. Usually, we do not have to know the data of the coordinates, except for the leader of the team.

As I expected, our operation took place above the ocean. I guessed that the enemy had already noticed our move. It was mysterious to me how such a huge operation could actually be realized in the first place. *Is it that one of the two sides starts the project?* However, both sides always fought against the other with almost the same combative capabilities. If only one side mobilized the large force, the confrontation would not develop into a battle. Such a one-sided fight could rarely be seen in recent times. In short, there was no such thing as a large-scale surprise attack. Come to think of it, it sounds strange.

They explained to us about the expected combative capabilities on the enemy side. But, no matter how much the numerical data was put into our heads, the only decision that we could make during the battle would be when I should lean the control stick to which side. We might need the data to make the decision about whether we continue to fight or break away to retreat. But once we took off from the ground, we all would forget about such a decision. Unless we are commanded to stop, we will always lunge at the enemy. It is the characteristic of pilots that we are. If anything, many of us are rather mild-mannered under usual circumstances. But, once we reach the sky, we all will tilt to the more active side like that, without any exception. It is never equivalent to becoming combatively aggressive. Fighting against the other is our courtesy. It is our respects for the opponents and the loyalty to ourselves.

At the end of the general meeting, a person wearing many military decorations delivered a speech. My guess was that no one bothered to listen to it. The reason for our having to fight just sounded ridiculous, no matter how much it was explained verbally. I was already getting tired of hearing such kind of terminologies in my short life. Friendship, love, society, family, nation, ethnicity, humankind, glory, honor ... *None of them is correct.* We were not fighting for such darn things. *If we have something to be explained with words, the closest one would be "living",* I thought. *Right.*

We fight to live. I mean, this is our job.

Those who objected to war tried to emphasize the ugliness of combats, but it was beside the point. They just enumerated beautiful words such as the preciousness of lives and the future of children. They just tempted us by telling us, “Hey, you can find more beautiful things here.”

Why have human beings never stopped the acts of war?

Why have there been conflicts in all ages?

Why do such ugly, empty, and sad deeds continue?

I wonder if they have thought about such things.

They insist human lives are precious.

But, there are things that are more important than such lives.

Those who know the fact have been fighting.

No matter how beautifully they try to express it, the fact cannot be denied. Those who fight and those who do not both dislike the ugliness.

Speeches by elites in high positions are always beautiful and full of affection. They held out the bouquet of justice. Those who like the bouquet can accept it. They can just give flowers to each other, and carry them proudly. However, such a bouquet cannot be loaded onto an aircraft. When we ascend to the sky, they are just extra weight.

Human beings have strength.

They admire the strength.

They crave for the strength.

Because they know it is the freedom.

What type of freedom will the bouquet bring us?

If we have a bouquet, can we climb the rocky stretches?

If we have a bouquet, can we dive deep into the water?

What makes people free is the strength.

Humans have it.

Believing in its own strength is the meaning of the strength.

I can fly. It is my strength and my freedom.

In order to keep flying, I will fight.

For nothing.

I want nothing.

For no one.

No one praises me.

I just want to keep flying.

I want to continue to be what I am.

As long as I am alive.

At the team meeting, we confirmed the radio communication frequencies and the codes to contact with each other. We were given fairly minute explanations about how to cope with the change of plans and the way to deal with troubles that may occur.

We got the information about the sortie time that might get shifted ahead of the original schedule. The schedule change made us prioritize the final checks of our aircrafts.

Then, we were summoned again for another meeting. We heard the sortie time would be moved up by one hour. I erased the numbers I had written in the reference material, and corrected them.

After that, we waited.

Silently, we were sitting on chairs.

Occasionally, I took a look at others. All the pilots were in the room.

One of them was standing by the window, and looking outside. There was also one who was walking in the deeper part of the room.

A clerical operator came to the room to hand me a small piece of paper, on which a message indicating that I had a phone call was written. I recognized the name of Somanaka from YA Newspaper Company. His message was: *I will call you again.* It

took a few seconds to be reminded of the face of the man. *Ah, I remember him*, I thought. I crumpled it and threw it into a trash can nearby.

The leader came back to the room.

Everyone looked at him.

“Alright, let’s go.”

The time has come.

The rest will follow, as it flows automatically.

I will move naturally just by breathing and living.

As a mechanical part of my aircraft, I will climb up into the sky.

While moving fast to the hangar, I looked up at the cloudy sky. But, I squinted at the brightness above them.

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Countless shadows of aircrafts were moving on the clouds. Indeed, it was just like great migration. I felt as if I had become a migratory bird. After a while, another flock was coming from our left side, and we were becoming a larger group.

I thought we would shortly be getting the report from the scouting team, which had left earlier. Currently, our flight course was not changed. The readings on the instruments were still. Same for my arms, pretty much. I checked the right and left sides, and then looked back occasionally. Just a few aircrafts were flying before me. Those coming from the left seemed to have positioned themselves to the rear left.

Most of the aircrafts flying near mine were Sankas. At first, two Someakas, latest models, were with us. But, they had gained the altitude and swerved to the right direction a bit earlier. It had got to be a part of their scouting duty. After that, only fighter aircrafts were flying together.

Then, our flying course was altered twice. They were slight adjustments of angles. The altitude remained the same. After flying for another 30 minutes, we started flying in formation. First, we spread out laterally and then separated vertically into three tiers. I was leading the middle layer.

The upper group moved ahead slightly. The lower group spread out even more

laterally, and then assumed lines that were trailing backward diagonally. These commands were given by using short pulses of the frequency, which was unique to each team. So, I did not hear any voice, obviously. I could only hear the sounds of revving engines, the sounds of the airframes rubbing the air, and my own breath. All I had to do was to focus on the front side of me, so I could relax relatively speaking.

Clouds disappeared and the ocean started to dominate the view below us. There seemed to be no landmass in my sight. Only white, short streams made by a ship could be seen. I was not sure whether it was a civilian vessel, and to which side it belonged to.

I noticed the images of aircrafts on the right side before me. Almost at the same time, I got a pulse signal. The formation spread out even more laterally. The enemies seemed to be divided into two layers. They would probably recover and reform before long.

The upper group accelerated and split into two, to the right and left. The lower tier was moving forward while spreading gradually. Only the middle layer, including me, lunged straight, without spreading, and would make turns on the other side beyond the enemies. That was our plan. *Well, will they allow us to lunge at them so easily? At least, it would likely to be impossible for me, who is in the lead. Those flying at the front would scatter the enemies, and the trailing aircrafts would fly straight into the deeper airspace.*

Again, I got a pulse signal. *The green light is on. It always starts quietly.*

“Alright.” I exhaled the breath.

I refastened and tightened the seat belt.

I am going to enjoy this as much as possible.

Calm down.

Watch the enemies' moves carefully.

Do not cling to one thing.

I will shoot and then break away.

I recalled the lessons learned from the dogfights in the past.

But those things are no more than just words.

The only things I can rely on here are the reactions ingrained within me.

They were approaching me.

They were coming in the formation that was assuming the cruciform section, to counter our formation that was in the shape of X, when viewed from the front side.

There was nothing on the ocean.

There was no cloud obstructing our sights.

The sun was behind us.

Only in the first phase, we had the advantage.

The aircrafts in the upper tier started turning over their wings, one by one, in sequence.

They were fluttering.

They were glittering.

Even though there are so many aircrafts, this airspace is vast enough.

We were already too close to each other to be able to recognize the opponents' formation.

Those flying at the front of the enemy formation appeared to be twin-engined aircrafts.

Are they going to fly straight toward us?

We will lunge at them as well.

From the right and left edges, the enemies were starting to descend one after another. *They are intending to take the position below us.*

A consort plane on my right side was leaving me while slightly diving to the right.

I checked behind me, to confirm the positions of consort aircrafts.

Preparing to jettison the drop tank.

Checking the oil pressure and the oil temperature.

Releasing the safety lock of the machine guns.

Before jettisoning the drop tanks, I adjusted the trim tab positions of the

elevators.

Shaking the rudder subtly and checking the airflow.

Checking the altitude.

Fuel, engine rotation, and the current time.

Listening to the pulse signals.

Radio is currently available and open. But, no one is saying anything.

Approaching the enemies even more.

In front of me, at the altitude of 400.

One of the enemies leaned its wings slightly and appeared to veer to the left.

I resisted the temptation to make the next move, in that situation.

I just ignore the enemy, and lunge more deeply into the airspace. The opponent might have the same thought as mine.

Getting closer.

One enemy aircraft was climbing up from the lower right.

It seemed to have shot the machine guns for a few seconds.

Where was it aiming at?

Keeping the horizontal orientation.

I opened the throttle even more.

Acceleration.

My airframe was dancing.

The one at the head of the enemy formation turned to the left, as expected.

The one behind it was coming toward me.

I dodged toward the right gently.

The next one was going upward.

The fourth one was also far from me.

The fifth one was closer.

It was lunging at me.

It is intending to shoot at me.

I floated up, and then flew down immediately.

Descending.

As I looked upward, that enemy aircraft was flying inverted. *Is it seeing me?*

Another two were coming from behind it.

I rolled to the right.

Checking beneath me.

I brought the orientation back at once, and started ascending.

Left.

One consort plane was right above me. *Such a dangerous one.*

I flew by the point approximately 10 meters below it.

The next one is an enemy, in front of me.

I brought the airframe to the horizontal flight orientation, and then let the wings be vertical immediately after that.

I used the elevators to turn toward the right rapidly.

One enemy was coming from behind me diagonally. It was too slow.

I rolled by 180 degrees, and then turned to the left quickly.

Moving deeper into the enemy zone.

Finally, the sky with no enemy aircraft was appearing.

“Ignore them. Go deeper.” It was the leader’s voice. “This is the thinnest part of the enemy formation.”

“Hatchback was shot down.”

“Yeah. I saw it.”

One enemy was flying straight, head-on toward me. I leaned toward the left.

The one who had been on my right would probably come toward me in the

meantime.

While pretending not to notice it for a short while, I assumed the inverted orientation, and used the elevators immediately.

In front of me, one enemy entered my shooting range momentarily.

Fire.

Up.

Choking the throttle for an instant.

I looked backward. *I am wishing not to be bumped from behind.*

The enemy coming from the front had just passed by above me.

I saw its lower fuselage. It was an aircraft with the air-cooled tractor configuration. *Old model.*

While ignoring the aircraft, I recovered the orientation, and went farther.

There was no enemy anymore.

“Deadeye, let’s move to the above to the right.”

“Let us return.”

“Here is the main event now.”

I pulled the control stick to deflect the elevators slightly. At the moment, I saw something in front of me.

“Wait.”

“Who?”

“It’s Deadeye. We still have some ahead of us.”

I brought my aircraft back to the horizontal flight.

In front of me, at a slightly higher altitude.

10 enemy aircrafts. No, there are at least 20.

“Get back. There are still even more enemies toward the deeper end!”

“Are you going to thrust into them? Or, are you going to get back?”

“I will thrust into them, and then get back.”

“Okay. You are impressive.”

Although I said nothing, I let my airframe roll, and then checked upward and downward.

There was no consort plane above. They could not come all the way to the airspace around me.

Below me, many aircrafts were jumbled up.

“So many of them.” Someone commented.

The enemy aircrafts outnumber ours. I have noticed it intuitively. But the problem lies in the number of enemies around me.

The enemy aircrafts divided into two groups, to the right and left. They were approaching me while forming a file. It was a fairly beautiful formation.

I gradually climbed up.

“You need not worry about anything.”

“They are the aircrafts we have never seen, aren’t they?”

The enemies from the left were coming first. *Shall I avoid them, or intercept them?*
Our formation was already collapsed.

I was worried about the moves that my consort aircrafts were making, but I had no time for that. I banked to the right and gained the speed.

Coming from the left.

Up.

High throttle.

I nearly grazing the airframe of a consort aircraft, and then ascended.

“That was risky. Is it you, Deadeye?”

“Pardon me.”

I half-rolled, and descended while executing an Immelmann turn.

I rolled over again and then went up.

Going back to the horizontal flight, and rolling.

The pack from the left was already behind me.

The ones on the right were spreading.

Coming from above.

Instantly, I choked the throttle.

Up.

From behind to the right.

Am I about to get shot?

One was passing by below me.

Down.

Flaps.

Holding down the aircraft nose ..., can I fire the shot?

I don't think so.

Another one was behind me.

And, there was yet another one from the right.

High throttle.

I dared to just fly downward. I had no choice but to fall.

It was gaining the speed rapidly.

I put up with making a roll.

I brought the nose toward the upper direction, gradually.

Rather than behind, I check above.

They were following me.

Further descent. *That's not good.*

Even though I knew it was a risky, all-or-nothing move, I brought the aircraft back to the horizontal flight orientation.

Drop tank jettisoned.

Bringing the flaps back.

Come on. Accelerate faster.

They are right behind me.

To the right.

Swinging to the left once, and going to the right again.

While turning, I checked behind me.

Flames appeared a bit above me.

One of my consort aircrafts was shot.

Who is it?

“Is there anyone who can lunge forward?” The leader shouted.

“Impossible, in such a situation.” Someone replied.

Impossible. I thought so, too. There were too many enemies.

I should give it up, and dance here.

Are there still the enemies behind me?

I shook the tail. I saw them just for a moment.

Ascend. High throttle.

There was another one above me.

Its course was a bit swerved from mine.

To the left.

Discerning the two enemies on the right.

I looked back downward. *It appears that they have given up for now.*

There were so many that I could not focus on just one target. *While switching from one dance partner to another, I am dancing frantically.*

Now, my body is getting warmed up.

My blood pressure is rising as well, I suppose.

Taking a deep breath.

While banking to the left, I choked the throttle.

I checked the sky above me, and then made a turn.

While gliding downward, I executed the rolling maneuver.

I looked for the next target. There were countless candidates.

There were several streaks of black smoke rising already.

One enemy was to my right below. It was chasing one of my consorts.

I adjusted the vector of my aircraft toward it.

While rolling once, I checked the situation around me.

Also looking at the airspace behind me.

Another one might be coming from above, but I still have time.

Choking the engine to control it.

The enemy noticed my move and made a turn toward left.

I had the wings vertical to fly knife-edge to go along with the enemy.

We were getting closer.

Right. Left.

I skidded obliquely, by using the rudders.

Hold it.

Just a little bit more.

Fire.

Pitch it upward, and leave.

Did I hit it?

I cannot confirm it.

I dodged the one coming from the left, by going downward.

Something was flying straight from the upper-right. It was an aircraft on my side emitting smoke.

Inverted flight. *Where is the enemy I saw earlier?*

Pitch the nose of the aircraft up, and fly toward the ground.

I saw the one that was engulfed in blazing fire. *So, it has been hit.*

A deep breath. *More to do.*

Check the fuel.

The oil temperature was rising.

Choke the throttle.

Adjust the trim tab alignment.

I climbed up, while targeting the one above me.

I was sneaking up carefully, while staying below it.

Also, I checked the airspace behind me.

Fly inverted.

The enemy banked to the right and descended.

I followed it.

I heard a roaring sound.

One aircraft was passing beside me from below.

The left wing creaked.

The enemy pitched the nose of its aircraft upward.

I also pulled the stick to deflect the elevators.

Swerving to the left. I could not make it on time.

Skidding to the side by using the rudders.

Fire.

By letting the aircraft bank to the right, I made a turn.

It was shooting at me from below.

I rolled further to the right.

After assuming the inverted flight orientation, I flew downward.

I brought the flaps back to the neutral positions.

High throttle.

Gradually, I was getting into the groove.

I hear the music.

Singing voices were approaching.

Making a turn toward the left.

My body was sinking into the seat.

I brought the elevators back.

I cut off the throttle for a moment.

Full flap configuration.

Deflect the elevators to pitch up.

I looked upward and tried to target the one passing above me, but I could not do so.

Stalling.

Taking advantage of the torque reaction to half-roll.

After checking the situation around me, I fell down toward the left.

Another enemy was coming from below.

I am still having no command over the flight control surfaces.

It's right in front of me. Fire.

The opponent also shot toward me.

I heard metallic noises from somewhere.

As I descended, I picked up the speed.

I'm fine now.

I made a turn as slowly as the blues.

Many streaks of black smoke filled my sight.

The sky, which had been blue earlier, was already painted grey.

The small images of aircrafts were dancing, here and there.

They were flying around like bugs.

“This is Crimson. Are you still out there?” I heard the leader’s voice.

“Moonlight. I got one of them.”

“Key Box. Over.”

“Dead Eye. I shot down just one so far.”

But no one else responded.

“Anyone else?”

“We have been reduced by a lot.”

“We may want to gain the altitude a bit.”

“Roger.”

Does it mean that there are more consort aircrafts at the higher altitude? Or, is it telling us that we should make use of the light weight of Sanka airframe? The opponents did not quite have the speed, but their turning performance was good. They seemed to be able to make sharp turns fairly well. *Dare I say that the type is similar to Sanka?*

I started flying easily, more or less. It was because a flock of enemies was breaking away from this airspace. *Are they gathering around somewhere?*

The four of us also ascended all together. It was the direction to take to return to our airbase.

“Is the party about to be over?” Someone asked.

Only one enemy was climbing up. It was getting closer and closer. I could discern its propeller engine. It was the enemy aircraft of tractor configuration.

Our leader aircraft responded, and started to intercept it.

The other three of us scattered.

While turning, I was observing what was transpiring.

The leader shot first and broke away horizontally.

The enemy’s aircraft applied the airbrake in the middle of the climbing maneuver. It appeared to enter the stalling phase.

Instead, it raced the engine and blew white smoke. It raised its nose further more. It pointed toward the zenith, and stayed still in midair. It shot at the leader's aircraft that had just passed by to end up flying above it. After that, the enemy aircraft descended tail first, somersaulted, and dove downward. I started chasing it immediately after that. The leader's aircraft was emitting black smoke from the bottom part of its rear tip part.

Moonlight and Key Box were lunging at the enemy from the other side while banking their wings diagonally, halfway to the knife-edge orientation. I was descending with my aircraft inverted.

Crimson, our leader, could not fight anymore. It was losing its balance.

It was going down extremely fast.

The enemy aircraft was making a rapid turn below.

It was so risky to the level that its main wings might be bending.

"Key Box, hold it. Let me go first."

"Okay."

Moonlight approached it while spiraling downward.

The enemy aircraft pitched upward.

I was getting ready to fly around to get behind it.

"What is this guy?" I heard Key Box's voice.

I could not see it.

"I got shot." It was Moonlight.

I could not see it because the direction was hidden in the main wing's blind angle. By the time I was turning next, Moonlight's aircraft was rolling in a flame. The enemy aircraft made a stall turn, cut back, and took the position above and behind Key Box.

"Do something!" Key Box shouted while leaning toward the left.

"Key Box, to the right!" I shouted.

I pointed the aircraft nose toward the direction and provided the covering fire,

but it was too far out of the range.

The canard wings of Key Box's aircraft were blown away. It was slowly pitching downward and started to dive.

The enemy was turning toward the right.

I am the only one left now. Three consorts have just been shot down in an instant.

I checked the situation around me. No one else was nearby.

Only streaks of smoke were floating here and there.

I maintained the altitude, let the main wings go vertical, and grasped the enemy's moves by getting my eye on it.

It was approaching me.

It was climbing up.

It is of an old model, but its engine is likely not to be normal.

The fuselage is thick and looks heavy. It was giving off the impression that it was flying solely with the brute force of raw power.

Its canopy glared with the variation of the sunlight.

Then, I saw the outline of its front cowling.

Only two parts were glaring.

Cat's eyes?

It is a cat's face.

I heard a pulse signal. It was the command to withdraw.

But I did not take my eyes off the cat's airframe.

The circle that it was drawing with its turning maneuver was getting tighter and more compacted.

I cut into the arc to get inside the circle.

It would be all right if I remained careful of its stalling-based maneuvers. My turning characteristic was superior.

I let my back adhere to the seat, and increased the acceleration.

It is getting closer.

I pushed up the throttle lever even more.

Flaps are ready.

Waiting for the proper timing.

How will the opponent start?

While we were both drawing circles, neither one of us made the next move.

The oil pressure was rising. The oil temperature was also high.

The main wings of my aircraft cut through the grey smoke in the air several times.

Come on now!

No action.

I shook the wings once as a feint.

The opponent did not move.

Darn it.

Calm down. If I am impatient and lose the cool, then I lose.

While trusting the efficiency of Sanka, shall I cut into the maneuver pattern quickly?

I simulated the deflections of the control surfaces in my head.

I will deflect four control surfaces six times within two seconds.

I will do it.

I held my breath, and got inside the enemy's arc.

Simultaneously, the opponent directed its nose toward me.

Right. Skidding.

Left. Flaps down.

High throttle.

With the elevators, I pointed the aircraft nose toward the direction.

Here it comes.

Within the shooting range.

But, it swerved to the left.

That's fast.

We passed by each other.

What the ...

I pulled it up and made a rapid turn.

I endured the acceleration by bracing myself around my legs.

Dare I say that it was not bad just because at least I was not shot?

The opponent was already about to complete its turning maneuver.

Hesitation.

Half-rolling, then trying to get under the opponent.

But it reacted immediately.

I resumed the turning maneuver.

No.

Behind.

Fast.

I twisted my body and pushed my face against the canopy.

It was approaching.

Not good.

Going up would turn out to be fatal.

I could do nothing but lean toward one side and cut down the aerodynamic lift.

It was coming.

“Dead eye, to the right!”

I leaned the control stick toward the right.

Who was that?

I felt as if I just heard the Kusanagi's voice.

I am shot.

The edge of the left wing?

Pulling up.

Half-rolling.

Down.

I could not locate the enemy.

The engine breathed. It sounded painful.

Where is it?

I cannot just stop moving.

I deflected the control surfaces desperately.

The surrounding background was spinning around with dizzying speed.

Where is it flying?

Above.

The enemy aircraft was above me. I saw the bottom part of its fuselage.

I made a dive.

Full throttle. Hang on.

I went through the black smoke.

I spotted the image of an aircraft in the distance before me. *Is it a consort plane?*

Calm down. It is still flying.

I looked back by turning my head to both right and left sides.

Is it coming?

No, I don't see it.

Where has it gone?

Below me?

I executed the half roll, and checked backward.

Now I see it. It is flying away.

It is going further away. I made the confirmation.

It seemed to be retreating.

Sigh.

I survived.

I brought the aircraft back to the upright orientation. I choked the engine slowly.

Distorted vibration.

I leaned forward and checked the edge of the left wing. The upper half of the vertical stabilizer was missing. It appeared to be torn off. I found a hole on the main wing. A little bit beyond where the fuel tank was. I managed to survive by the skin of my teeth.

I checked the statuses of the control surfaces. The ailerons are fine. The flaps are moving.

However, the rudders were heavy.

I looked downward and checked the pedals.

I should not push myself or luck too much.

My legs hurt.

I do not know why.

I looked around.

Several aircrafts were flying toward the opposite direction in the distance on my right side. *Six aircrafts or seven.*

I saw another one above me. It was flying in the same direction as mine.

Many aircrafts were in the airspace to the front. About twenty.

Then, on the left side below me, I saw a flock of aircrafts. It was the core wing of the enemy aircrafts flying toward the opposite direction.

Well over fifty. *If they are climbing up toward me, that will be all she wrote.* I thought.

The aerial combat seems to be over by now.

It is not a matter of will power running out. The fuel is too low.

I took off the goggles and took a deep breath.

Phew, that was outrageous.

The most formidable foe that I have ever encountered.

Rubbing my eyes.

My breath was white.

I broke into a sweat suddenly.

But, I feel cold.

A hole might be punched somewhere.

I was receiving the signal that was commanding us not to use the radio communication.

Anyway, it's over.

I was returning to the base while gradually lowering the altitude.

My Sanka managed to keep flying.

The engine temperature was not going down. The radiator system might also be damaged. Still, the engine was managing to keep running. Although it was unbelievably cold in the cockpit, I was in no position to complain about it, considering the condition of the engine. *I mean, I can keep flying thanks to this cold air.*

When the landmass started appearing in my sight, I was feeling really glad. But, the vibration of the aircraft was becoming worse and worse. The engine seemed to be getting ready to sputter and halt.

The oil temperature is abnormal. The oil pressure is dropping.

No radio communication allowed yet.

My body was chilled, and my hands were about to become numb.

I applied both hands on my mouth and face alternately. The pain in my legs faded away and there was no sensation.

Decreasing the altitude. Clouds were not so thick anymore.

The fuel was almost empty.

“Not again.” I murmured.

I might have flown for too long.

Or, is the fuel leaking from somewhere?

I leaned forward to check the main wing. The broken part of the vertical stabilizer was already gone.

Several Sankas were flying around mine. *I guess that they were worrying about the status of my Sanka.*

Ah, it's cold.

I was about to lose consciousness.

I want to fall asleep, I felt.

I want to dive into that warm blanket.

I want to take a hot shower.

A lighter will just do. I wanted to light it to warm myself.

I touched the instrument panel, which was very cold.

I was fumbling about for something warm.

There cannot possibly be such a thing here.

I lowered the altitude even more.

Flying through the clouds, I sank into the dim air.

It was pure white below me. *Is it snow?*

For how long will I have to fly? I tried to check the current coordinate and read the map, but I could not move my fingers well.

I warmed my fingers by applying them on my mouth..

Irregular vibration.

The airframe was creaking.

Suddenly, it became quiet.

Only the sounds of the wings cutting the air remained.

The canard wings wailed like a whistle.

The glass of the canopy was also quivering.

I moved the throttle lever, but nothing happened.

I tried to use the starter motor, to no avail.

I twisted my body and looked backward.

I could see the edges of the propeller blades, which were about to stop. The starter motor was barely reacting.

I put my finger on the switch to send a mayday.

I pushed it up.

Since the speed was about to reach its limit, I descended.

I did not have time to spread the map.

I slapped the altimeter.

800?

Is it that low?

“Dead Eye? How is your condition?” I heard a voice, with noise.

“This is Dead Eye. I think the fuel has run out.” I replied. “What is down there?”

“There is no city. Avoid the trees to touch down.”

“I will if I can.”

I descended while banking gently. It was white below me.

Mountains were a bit far away, for a bit of consolation.

I was going lower and lower.

As long as I maintained the velocity, I could make a decision about what to choose from the slight variety of selections in the final phase. The altitude was 200.

I was approaching a hill.

I contemplated whether to fly over it or to go around its base.

There seemed to be no wind. The visibility was good.

There was a shack-like building to the left. A truck was parked. They were buried

in the snow. Roads could not be seen anywhere.

Making a turn. *I have no choice anymore.*

100.

50.

Extending the landing gears.

I heard a strange sound.

The gears were not down.

How much worse is this gonna get?

Actually, on a snowy road, tires are probably useless anyway.

25.

I pitched the nose of the fuselage up.

There. Good kid.

Go ahead, and slide on it.

I could not move my legs anymore. *Which side is the rudder facing?*

10.

Get it up.

More.

The sight in front of me was becoming invisible.

I looked sideways.

I saw for a moment fences buried in snow.

It's coming.

Three seconds after the projected moment, the rear part of the airframe hit something.

Impact.

The right main wing was lowered, and then it crashed.

Spinning round and round.

The sound of the impact.

My body was being shaken.

Holding my breath.

The seat belt cleft into my body.

I feel the shaking.

Whiteout.

I felt some kind of pressure like wind blown into my face.

Headphones were pulled away.

Something was pushing my body sideways.

Booming sound.

It has not stopped yet.

I was swung around many times.

Well, out of commission for good, I thought.

I mean, this aircraft.

Maybe, I myself as well.

Like a hard rock, eh?

Drums are beating.

I was thrust up from below.

I was hit from above as well.

But, it was getting slower.

I was being shaken softly.

It is about to stop.

The metal creaked, as if it was screaming.

At the end of the crash landing, the aircraft leaned sharply. I was thrown out to the side with the seat.

Something heavy had fallen onto my head.

I put my hand on it.

It stopped.

It was still shaking, though.

Still, it seemed to have stopped.

I could see nothing.

I moved my hands.

I removed the thing on my head.

Heavy.

It was aluminum of the control panel. It had been deformed completely. It was entangled with cords. I attempted to remove the belt. It was tightly constricting my body so hard. *I am on pace to be strangled with the belt to death.*

My fingers touched the metal clasp.

I took a breath.

Painful. But I do not feel cold now.

What are my fingers doing?

The metal clasp cannot be removed. Where is it?

My hand gave up on unbuckling the belt, and looked for my face instead.

I pulled the goggles and removed them.

Breath.

Breath.

It seemed that it was toppled over sideways.

This way is down, I suppose.

Is that from the compressor? I heard the rattling of revolving parts and hissing of leaking air.

Oh, it's ground.

Have I come back to it again?

There is nothing I can do about it, really.

Can I use the radio communication?

But, the headphones are missing.

Where have they gone?

My hands were still trying to remove the seat belt.

My fingers hurt.

How is my left hand?

It was wet. *Is it blood?*

Ah, but I seem to be still alive.

I felt like listening to music.

I like slow blues.

My right hand finally removed the metal clasp. I knew it could be removed.

My body dropped toward the right side.

My face was pressed against the control panel. It was painful.

I used my right hand to manage to get my body up.

The canopy was still kept intact.

Although it could not be moved smoothly, I slid the canopy back a little.

There was snow nearby.

I could touch it, if I reached for it.

I moved the body slightly. I slipped on the canopy and dropped on the snow.

The aircraft was not just tumbled over on its side. It was inverted.

I crawled onto the snow. I recognized the Sanka turned over upside down. It was a place like a river bank. The surrounding around me was all white.

Still, it was not colder than it was in the sky.

I could not move my left hand. It might be broken.

The blood was dripping from the wound above my eye.

It was not so serious, either.

I moved away from the aircraft, little by little. I felt that there was no chance of the aircraft exploding. I looked back at it a few times. But, it remained the same. *It would not fly again.*

-6-

I fell flat on the snow, and gazed at the sky. Even though the sky was cloudy in gray like mud, it was starting to appear brighter gradually as I was watching it. *I wonder if it is reflecting the snow on the ground.*

My body was buried in the snow and drops of water fell on my face intermittently. They have probably flown off from grass or branches nearby.

Nothing is flying in the sky anymore.

Only our feelings still remain there.

Above the clouds.

Yeah, I really had a good time.

That black cat was wonderfully fast.

Although the aircraft model was different, the one might be the same cat whom I once encountered when flying with Tokino. Perhaps.

In the end, no one belonging to my team managed to go back to the base successfully. I could not remember even the name of our leader and could recall just the faces of other teammates. We could not fulfill the duty to lunge first at the enemy aircrafts and fly around to take their rear. It was partly because the enemy formation split into two. They might have outnumbered us as well.

It is too late for me to care about such things.

Everyone, you have enjoyed flying, correct?

I am pretty sure that no one is regretting.

As for me, ah, I feel very good now.

I cannot believe how wonderful I am feeling, despite the fact that I am now on the ground. I must have had a really fulfilling time. I flew for the first time since a long time ago. I could fly as much as I wanted. My only regret was that the aircraft was destroyed. The young mechanic tuned it up for me ... What did he say? He was ...

Oh.

I recalled one thing.

I heard Kusanagi's voice.

If I did not lean the control stick toward the right to deflect the ailerons, I would not have been able to come back alive. Was Kusanagi watching me? No, I did not see such an aircraft image. Was it an auditory hallucination? Or, did I mistake someone's voice for hers? But, there was no one around me at that time.

I am always saved by Kusanagi.

I am staying alive thanks to her.

So, I still cannot die so easily.

After taking a rest only for a short time, I will try to return to the airbase by foot.

And then, I will get the wound healed, stay put, and take a quiet rest. That will allow me to go back to the sky again.

I mean, pilots are suffering from overall shortages more than aircrafts.

I know I will be summoned again to compensate for the personnel shortage.

Until then. I will just dream it.

Looking up at the sky to make sure not to forget it.

Inhaling the cold air into my body.

I will wait for it.

I can fly again.

Someday in the future.

Somewhere, for sure.

Epilogue

According to what they told me, I woke up on the bed, three days after being hospitalized.

Although I could not speak, I could hear what others were saying. A man that I did not know stood beside me, moved his mouth, and uttered words. I understood that they were words. But, I could not comprehend the meaning, and was incapable of understanding in what language of which country the words were spoken. *I am afraid that it is because some parts of my brain were damaged.*

They ordered me to drink something viscous and tasteless. Every day. Still, it was not a difficult task for me. I could just think of it as oil. *Finally, I can become a machine,* I thought. My left hand was bandaged and heavy. It was as if something other than my hand was stuffed into it altogether.

I could not get out of the bed. I could not see my legs. I could not even tell if I still had my legs.

Judging from the fact that there is no window here, this place might be in the basement, I thought. Many pipes were running on the ceiling. Two long fluorescent lights. Luckily, it was not cold. I was the only one in this room. This bed was placed by a wall. Some parts of the room could not be seen, due to the partitions. But those parts were darker. When the frosted glass of the door became brighter, it was the nighttime. Everyone else seemed to be on the other side of the door.

It was quiet.

It was terribly dead quiet.

While looking at an intravenous drip tube, I remained still.

A needle was stuck into my right arm.

I could feel with my cheeks a towel placed on the bed sheet.

Subtle scent of disinfectant.

It was not cold.

Nothing was attached on the wall. Not even a calendar.

I had something in my hand.

It was a button with a cord.

If I pushed it, someone would come for me.

I had no pain.

I wonder if I still have my legs.

I should not push the button just for that reason.

I should have pushed it in that snow.

I pushed it.

But, the machine gun was not shot.

I felt good in the room.

Refreshing.

Footsteps were approaching. The sound of the door being opened.

“Sir, is anything wrong?” A woman’s voice.

I tried to look at the direction. I could move my eyes.

“Sir, don’t worry. Let me remove it, okay?”

She appeared to be stopping the intravenous drip injection.

The needle was removed.

My right hand was obedient. It was still holding the switch.

“Here, it’s not painful, is it?”

Not painful.

“Sir, it is time to sleep.”

The sheet was pulled up toward my face, and my hands were hidden in it.

I was not cold.

I closed my eyes.

“Good night.”

I want to have a dream.

The dream in which I fly around in a brighter space.

“If something happens, please let me know. Okay?”

The dream in which I fly around freely in the beautiful blueness.

I close my eyes, and wait for it.

My body will hover in the air and ascend.

The wings slice through the wind and the white vapor is trailing.

I am waiting for it, while keeping myself steady.

Even if I wait, no one comes to me.

I am always alone.

Oh yes, I will buy a bouquet and bring it.

To where?

I wondered where to.

Anyway, I will buy a bouquet and bring it.

For whom?

I wondered for whom.

But, definitely, I will buy a bouquet and bring it.

And then ...

This book was first published by Chuokoron-Shinsha in Japan in 2006 and translated in 2020 for The BBB: Breakthrough Bandwagon Books .

The Interview About Flutter Into Life with Dr. MORI, Hiroshi B (Chief Editor of The BBB): Today, to commemorate the conclusion of “Flutter Into Life”, the fourth novel of “The Sky Crawlers” series, we would like to interview the author, Dr. MORI, Hiroshi. In this interview section of the end of each

volume, Dr. MORI always talks about many anecdotes relating to the work. We have received very positive feedbacks from both overseas readers and Japanese enthusiasts of your works. Dr. MORI, you must have been interviewed many times in the past about the first novel (of the series) “The Sky Crawlers” and the entire series. But, there are not too many of interviews that just feature this fourth novel of the series, I think. The interviewer himself has been looking forward to this day since a year ago. We really appreciate your cooperation. Thank you so much.

MORI, Hiroshi: It is I who should thank you. Honestly, I think this fourth novel might be the plainest one among the series. In fact, the story of this work serves as a key point of the series. But, I do not quite think that there are too many readers who have read from the first to the fourth volume. So, I have the impression that the work is buried in obscurity. That is also one of the aims of the author. You know, I did not want to make it simple forcefully. Anyway, I remember I wrote this novel most consciously with a high aim in my mind.

B: I see. Now I understand that the peculiarity or the striking uniqueness of “Flutter Into Life” among the series is created deliberately and consciously by the author. I’m really convinced by the account.

By the way, each volume of “The Sky Crawlers” series has an impressive title. Especially, we cannot ignore the symbolic fact that the three works of all the six volumes (five novels and one story collection) include the word “sky” in their titles. Also, I might be able to point out that the word “air” in the second novel “None But Air” and “heaven” in the third novel “Down to Heaven” can be paraphrased as “sky”. Of course, the word “flutter” in “Flutter Into Life” might be associated with

“sky”. But, the relation with “sky” would be not as direct as that for the other five books. I have had such an impression since 13 years ago, when I saw the title for the first time. When Dr. MORI finished writing the first five novels (generally known as “S&M series” starting from “The Perfect Insider”) as a professional novelist, you said, “I changed the current of the series on purpose when writing the fourth novel (titled ‘Jack the Poetical Private’).” In a similar way, did you give the meaning of changing the current of the series to the title of “Flutter Into Life”? For example, was it an intention like a dramatic change before the climactic part, or the hook, of a popular song? The phrase “flutter into life” can be interpreted as “soaring into living”. It is the opposite of the previous novel “Down to Heaven”, whose title can be translated as “falling into death”. In this respect, I felt the impression of the rapid development, like the rapid turns to left and right by a fighter aircraft that is described in the stories.

MORI: I understand many people have the impression similar to yours. But, in fact, for those who know aircrafts well, the word “flutter” indicates a phenomenon in which wings or flight control surfaces vibrate under certain conditions. It is also known as resonance. Once the phenomenon occurs, the wings or flight control surfaces are destroyed, and the aircraft ends up crashing. So, it used to be greatly feared. In these days, experts now understand how the phenomenon occurs and design the aircrafts properly to avoid the trouble from the start.

In short, this title indicates “the flutter leading to the life”. When external forces are applied on the aircraft, the material property that generates the reactive force, or its elasticity, will cause the vibration. Then, when certain other conditions are met, resonance will be amplified, emanate, and bring about the disaster. I described the image, which expresses that there are such dangers in our lives.

When a person who is usually mild accepts some kind of external force, he or she will develop a strong internal feeling, show an unexpected reaction to the people around the one, and end up executing destructive deeds as a result. Actually, we often see the phenomenon in which the very person or the people around the one say, “Why has such a gentle person ended up doing such a terrible thing?” The title implies such a phenomenon dynamically.

For people who know aircrafts well, the word “flutter” can be associated just with the phenomenon, and nothing else. In the way that the terminology of aircrafts and

aerodynamics is being used, the title is in the same category as those for other works of the series. It is not an exception.

B: Since I know so little about matters related to aircrafts and aeronautics, I have not known that the word “flutter” has such a meaning, quite embarrassingly. I have just learned of the phenomenon that involves the so-called “resonance”, and, thanks to that, I have just raised the depth of understanding over the subject drastically as if the mist in my mind has cleared up. At the same time, the interpretation I had about the title is opposite of the true meaning. I even think this interview is already worth conducting just because I got the chance to listen to your explanation about “flutter”. I guess many readers will be surprised as well.

Next, let me ask you a customary question. At the beginning of each chapter of this book is a quotation from “Gift from the Sea”, written by Anne Morrow Lindbergh. Why did you decide to quote them from the book? Was it the author or the book you feel the attachment to? Also, in the interview at the end of “Down to Heaven”, you said, “I think, by excerpting from a piece, I tend to bring the content of the novel in the works that I am working on closer to the image that is expressed by the excerpt.” How did “Gift from the Sea” affect the story of “Flutter Into Life”?

MORI: At first, in the respect that the author was a wife of Charles Lindbergh and an aviator herself, she is related to this series. In addition, I think the essential and abstract parts of “kindness” are the common factor for both works.

B: As you say, I felt the quotations from Lindbergh’s book were very natural because of the affinities of both works.

Through the whole series, the representative of fighter aircraft pilots is Kusanagi and that of mechanics is Sasakura. Dr. MORI, you do not pilot an actual airplane, but I feel that you share something in common with pilots because you control model airplanes and love to drive cars at high speed. At the same time, you are similar to mechanics in the respect that you love working on craftworks. I think you have both aspects within you, obviously. But, which part of you do you think is larger than the other, a pilot or a mechanic? Each time I read the conversation between Kusanagi and Sasakura, I find myself thinking which one’s point of view is closer to that of Dr. MORI’s. Needless to say, neither of them is Dr. MORI himself. But, if one of them is closer to you, could you tell us which one of them?

MORI: When I write a novel, I naturally see everything from the point of main character's view. Sasakura is not the main character, so his thoughts do not appear in the text. It focuses on the person that the main character imagines, and on the actions taken by the person that the main character imagines.

Also, the type of person as the author always differs from the types of characters in the novels. Even if some parts share things in common, more parts have got to be different as a whole. I'm not sure which one of them (Kusanagi and Sasakura) is closer to me. I feel it is something that cannot be measured in distance.

While writing a novel, an author has an opportunity to assimilate himself or herself into the mind of every character in the story. Conversely, the eyes to observe every character objectively will be needed even more. I think that the very being of the author has almost nothing to do with the work itself. I mean, the substance of the author does not exist in the story. The author should be writing while forgetting about its own very being.

B: In my personal opinion, not a few authors tend to empathize with characters, especially with the main character, and to identify the one with the very being of the author. But I understand Dr. MORI observes the characters objectively while keeping a certain distance from them. I think the nature is quite rare among authors and is the forte that Dr. MORI possesses. While listening to your account, I am coming to the realization again.

Since Dr. MORI is the possessor of very high quality skills, almost all the characters in your novels might be inferior to the author. On the other hand, I might be able to say that some of them surpass Dr. MORI in their definitively specialized fields. In another series of your books, formidable geniuses, who have the highest levels of intelligence and the top-class intellect among all the humankind, are described. Which types of characters can you describe more easily, the ones who are more skilled or less capable than the author himself? In other words, which one can you describe more easily, talented ones or incompetent ones? Or, is there not any difference between them in particular?

MORI: It makes almost no difference. Still, as the series continues, I start to be able to write characters more easily because I get used to them. In short, the works of imagining them and making the decisions become scarce. However, if the series continues further, the author will be restrained by the works in the past and what he

can describe about the character will be limited. It gets harder once again for the author to describe them.

As for geniuses or idiots, I think the latter would be more difficult to describe clearly, I must say. There can be various vectors of stupidity, so the author has to select one of them. Folly is ordinary, and, at the same time, extraordinary. Because of its unsophisticated nature, I can say that it is difficult to create a stupid character. On the other hand, characters who have gifted abilities have things in common. It can be analogized to climbing up a mountain, only to end up reaching the same summit. The higher they are, the more they get congregated to one, common point.

I feel that the author's ability is not so closely related to the types of characters to be described in the story. For example, as long as an author has the ability to observe others, despite lacking the ability to create, the character can still be described by basing it on actual people. One author constructs characters very technically, another author describes the characters intuitively. There can be many ways to describe the characters. So, I think each author should choose the way with which the author's capabilities can be exploited.

B: I am convinced by your explanation, which gets down to the point. To be sure, geniuses are limited in variations, as they are congregated to the very pointed peak of the pinnacle, whereas stupid characters can be expressed in countless variations of patterns. It may be the reason why the latter is more difficult to deal with. Also, as you talked in an interview in the past, what an author can describe in the works are restricted by the previous works. I think it is a thoughtful theme that involves the destined hurdle of serial works.

Let me change the subject. I gave thoughts about several names of the characters in "The Sky Crawlers" series. They are the names starting with "S" and ending with "a": Sasakura, Sagara, Sanka, *etc.* And the ones beginning with "K" and finishing with "i": Kusanagi, Kai, Kannami, *etc.* As for another example, I can point out the similarity between Akiko and Aiko, described in your short stories titled "I'm In Debt to Akiko" and "Kappa", respectively. Although it might not be done consciously, I imagine they are the sounds that the author likes or the sounds you have some attachment to. Do you have something of the sort in your mind?

MORI: I did not have any special intention like that in particular. Still, names are sounds and resonances. They are closer to rhythms and melodies than to just mere

letters. So, I decide which names to use, based on the impressions that I have when I actually pronounce them. I do not have special attachment to names, specifically speaking. I quickly forget even the names of important characters. It is not unusual for me to check my previous works or the pages of the books that I have written before. To begin with, I am the person who does not remember other persons' names.

B: It is interesting to me that you pronounce the name and decide whether to use that name, based on the impression. Dr. MORI, I know you are a music lover, too. When you decide the names of characters, their sounds are important to you. I understand it is the reason the names reflect your favorite sounds.

Regarding the characters, I once asked you in the interview at the end of “None But Air” about a surprising trick which readers can experience by reading “The Sky Crawlers” and “None But Air” only in this particular order. In Episode 3 of this work “Flutter Into Life”, at the scene of a parking lot near a funeral hall, there is a similar trick about one child, who visits a car in which the main character is waiting, and whose identity is hidden for just a few pages. Although this trick is revealed soon after that, did you dare to conceal the identity of the kid as a way to provide neat, little services to the enthusiastic fans of your mystery fictions? I ask you about it because I feel the essence of your intention to keep describing the one as just “the child” while hiding the identity. In this respect, I feel that it is similar to the trick used in one of your short stories that I translated in the past.

MORI: Concealing the secrets from the readers is a secondary result. Originally, it is based on the way the main character formulates the mindset. I mean, if the main character is not interested in the identity or the gender of the kid, then it is appropriate for the author to describe the one as just “the child”. Before long, the main character happens to recognize the kid as a female. It is the moment in which the main character becomes aware of her gender.

In the case of “None But Air”, it is the expression in which the character is not aware of its own gender. I did not intend to write it as a trick to deceive the readers.

I think the writer assimilated himself into the eyes and the mind of the main character's, to such an extent. I aim to write expressions that are honest and natural to the character. I mean, I write sentences naturally according to the order and the extent of the recognition. Occasionally, I do so, even if they may turn out to look

unnatural from the general point of view, and to give the impression that they are thoughtless to the readers.

B: I see. It is an idea that I have not come up with. I now understand that you wrote the part of the story that way because you traced the consciousness of the main character. I imagine that Dr. MORI erases his very own being completely when writing a novel.

In this work “Flutter Into Life”, a woman named Sagara, who appears for the first time in the series, plays a very important role. Once the secret of Sagara is revealed, we can imagine that the woman described at the beginning of the first novel “The Sky Crawlers” might have been Sagara herself. Did you have such a structured story idea from the beginning? Or, after you introduced the character named Sagara, did you end up bringing her closer to the woman at the beginning of “The Sky Crawlers”?

MORI: I can say that they are both right. I imagined such a character from the beginning. At the same time, while writing the story, I myself will eventually notice, “Oh, she is that very person that has appeared previously.” It is the coincidence in which she is described twice accidentally.

B: The notion of the author noticing certain things while writing the story is truly an insight that is profound. As one of the creators myself, I am impressed and am learning a lot. At the same time, I feel I have managed to take a glimpse of your unique method of thinking and the secret for your writing.

In Episode 3 of this work, there is a sentence that goes like this: “When I was a child, I frequently had a dream of flying in the sky. But recently, I hadn’t had such experience.” Dr. MORI, do you still have a dream in which you fly? I ask you this question because I recall that a certain world-famous novelist once confessed to a psychologist, “Before becoming an author, I had a dream in which I flew. But, since becoming an author, I have never had a dream in which I fly.” Dr. MORI is a novelist who sticks to the notion of “sky” to this extent. So, I would like to know if you still have a dream in which you fly.

MORI: I still have a dream about piloting an aircraft. But, after becoming an adult, I have not had a dream in which I levitate like Superman. I think it is because I have come to the realization that such an ability is unnatural or unrealistic. I still

have a few dreams every day. However, phenomena which are impossible physically and scientifically do not happen even in my dreams. Dreams I have recently had are just about daily and natural matters. Contents of my dreams have not gone through transformations as the result of my becoming a novelist. In short, I think my life has not changed by so much.

B: You do not have a dream, which is physically and scientifically impossible. Then, the contents of your dreams have not changed even after you became a professional novelist. From these facts, I feel the logical nature of your thoughts and the consistency of your life that is unwavering and not affected by your activities as an author.

Dr. MORI, since you made a debut as a professional novelist, you have effectively used a technique in which you insert parts that stack up poetic, short sentences in rapid succession into the middle of longer texts of the novels. We may be able to interpret the descriptions of dogfights in “The Sky Crawlers” series as the extensions of your poetic expressions. At the same time, they are limited to the field of aviation, and they are the unique expressions that can be found just in this series. As one of readers, I am always thrilled to read the scenes of piloting aircrafts. Dr. MORI, how do you yourself think about the style of writing aerial combats that can be read only in “The Sky Crawlers”? Do you have a sense of achievement about creating a new style of expression?

MORI: I have not studied what types of writing styles of literary expressions exist in the world. So, I do not know whether it is a new style or not. Still, whenever I write a book, I face the challenges, such as, “I try something new, such as this.” and “Will the readers still follow anything like this?” It is similar to the feeling that I get whenever I get bored and feel like taking extra risks.

I have even tried some expressions, which are incorrect in terms of Japanese grammar. (Especially, unnatural conjugation or something of the sort.) At one point, to some extent, I thought, “These expressions might be something new.” I have attempted to observe the reactions from the readers by exploiting such experimentations, to see if the readers may understand what I want to do or end up mistaking them for just typos. In the context, they can be interpreted as a kind of self-satisfaction.

About poetic expressions, they were criticized for some years after my debut as a

professional novelist. However, as time has passed, the number of those who accept them with high regards has been increasing. I guess that the readers have gotten accustomed to them. Whether they are criticized or acclaimed highly does not matter to me. The main principle of mine is the time control to convince the readers to stop reading for just a moment and to take a breath at the point.

B: Now I know that the descriptions of dogfights have been challenging even for the author himself. About the expressions that are not grammatically correct as Japanese, I noticed them when I translated them into English. In fact, a little after we published the first novel “The Sky Crawlers”, one American reader criticized it, by posting, “These sentences are not grammatically correct. Terrible translation!”, or something of the sort in that context. Those sentences in English were actually the directly and faithfully translated versions of the boldly expressed Japanese texts that were written by you, Dr. MORI. After we published the second novel “None But Air”, the same reader praised the similar styles of sentences, by posting the message, “Great translation!” In one aspect of the matters, I felt that the continuation of the publication would eventually lead to conveying our intentions that are embedded in the texts to the readers more effectively.

This time, the births of those who are called Kildren and the possibility of Kildren’s transformation were mentioned for the first time in the series. The concept of Kildren has been described since the first novel “The Sky Crawlers”. Dr. MORI, did you come up with the ideas involving the birth of Kildren and the possibility of their becoming something else while writing this fourth novel? Or, have you already formulated the vague idea of the possibility when you were writing the first book, “The Sky Crawlers”?

MORI: When I was writing this fourth novel, I imagined that a certain character would come up with such an idea. I am not sure if it is true or not. I can tell you that it may turn out to be the delusion of the characters in the story.

In order to describe their delusions, I have to have the delusion as well. Moreover, I have to imagine along the way in which the characters have the delusions. The results of such actions of mine will eventually become the details of the texts that I write in the story. Even if the author has already formulated the vague outline of a plot since a long time ago, I think the details of the plotline cannot be solidly constructed in advance. I mean, they are the decorations that the

author can carve out only at the very moment of creation.

B: I am afraid that this expression may be inappropriate if I use the word “typical”. Let me say, generally speaking, for “many” authors, what are described in their novels are decided and solidified before they are written. I am impressed by the uniqueness of Dr. MORI because you keep the uncertainty by saying, “It might be the delusion of this character.” In my opinion, that particular characteristic as an author is rare and the outstandingly strong point of Dr. MORI.

The other day, I got your permission to translate into English the final long novel “Cradle the Sky” and “Sky Eclipse”, the only short story compilation of the series. I am deeply grateful to you about that. In the interview at the end of “None But Air”, you said you were originally planning to conclude the series with five long novels, if the completion of the movie version of “The Sky Crawlers” was not delayed. This means that Dr. MORI had just one more volume to work on to conclude the series, by the time of the completion of “Flutter Into Life”. Back then, did you have a clear image in which the series would be concluded beautifully with the completion of what was going to be the final novel “Cradle the Sky”? Or, did you have the premonition that you might have to write more than one novel after that point?

MORI: No, I did not. I always thought that this series would be concluded with five novels and I would not have to write another one after writing the fifth volume. The reason why I wrote the short story compilation was that the demand for the movie version was taken into account. To put it another way, the publishing company asked me to write it. In a way, I think it might have been like adding a fifth wheel or gilding a lily. On the other hand, this series has many difficult parts to be understood due to its general lack of user-friendliness, or reader-friendliness. If I consider the fact that more and more readers are getting their hands on the series thanks to the movie version, I am thinking that I should offer something like the hints to supplement the information to compensate for the lack of sufficiency. In other words, it could have possessed the value as reference books.

In reality, I hardly received any criticism of the story collection (Sky Eclipse) being superfluous. In the respect, my feelings differ a bit from those of the readers. I think that readers in general seem to want authors to talk as many things as possible, even if they may turn out to be unnecessarily excessive. Especially, that is the case for the enthusiasts and fanatics, I guess.

B: It is truly exciting and stimulating, just to listen to such a background account. Surely, “The Sky Crawlers” series could have been concluded just with five novel volumes. Even if the extra volume of the story collection was written for the promotion of the movie, I am sure that the series has achieved the greater depth thanks to the additional story compilation. So, I would like the overseas readers to look forward to the final novel “Cradle the Sky” and the only short story collection “Sky Eclipse”. I myself look forward to the responses from the overseas readers.

That is all for the questions we have this time. As of January 2019, when we conducted the previous interview with you, “The Sky Crawlers” series had been downloaded in 25 countries. As of January 2020, the number of countries in which this series has been downloaded up to this point has increased to 29. “The Sky Crawlers” series is right in the middle of the process of being discovered in many countries around the world. I expect the work to keep spreading throughout the world while crossing borders. Dr. MORI, I would like to express my gratitude for your permitting us to translate such a wonderful series. Please keep cooperating with us for the final novel “Cradle the Sky” in the next year and the story compilation “Sky Eclipse” in the year after next as well. Thank you so much today for your precious talks.

MORI: I think translation is such a backbreaking work. At first, I never even dreamed that all the works of the series would be translated.

I would like to thank you for that sincerely. There are still some works left, though. I look forward to the rest of the series to be translated.

This interview was conducted in January 2020, exclusively for The BBB: Breakthrough Bandwagon Books.